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The
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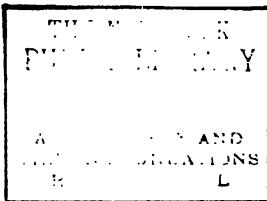
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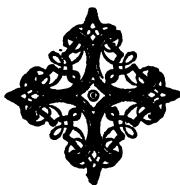
"‘Marcia,’ he said, ‘you—you’re absolutely edible! I forbid you to wear anything else but this dress as long as you live. And, with it . . . this’"

THE SEE-SAW

A Story of To-day

BY SOPHIE KERR

AUTHOR OF
"The Blue Envelope," "The Golden Block," Etc.

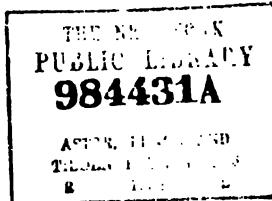


Frontispiece

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THE SEE-SAW

THE SEE-SAW

CHAPTER I

THE two women who sat in the big quiet-running limousine were unlike each other in every way save in a strange, dim resemblance of feature—the mark of kinship by blood. The older had been middle-aged for at least thirty of her fifty years. Her arched nose, her high brow, the whole clear outline of her face should have belonged to a woman of power and courage and wide capabilities, but the droop of her mouth, and her eyes, dulled and kindly and vague, betrayed her as one who had been thwarted, had missed somehow all that she might have been.

The other woman had the height, the same build, and the same fine head, but with so great a difference! She was young and lovely—made in the strength and harmony that the older woman lacked. There was spirit in the curve of her delicate, determined chin, and the thin flying line of her black brows accented her gray-blue eyes—eyes that could laugh and weep and flash at you seemingly all at once and never

abate a scrap of their charm. Her hair was black like her brows and lashes; her skin clear rose and white. She had the look of having lived life eagerly and never found it dull, but there was also in her face the look of one who has known things that were hard and things that were dangerous, but had never lost her courage—a controlled fire, a tried mettle. It was not surprising that she should have had this look for she had been married five years to Harleth Crossey, of whom his own mother said that he was “as self-willed as a shooting star and just as uncomfortable about the house.” Which was true, but omitted all reference to his undeniable personal charm. So, if Marcia Crossey had not lost her singing heart in domesticity it was because she had never loved Harleth a millionth less than on the day she had said her marriage vows.

The older woman was talking in a voice as gentle and as vague as her eyes—the voice of one who does not expect to have her words listened to.

“It has been the greatest pleasure for me to be with you and see your new house, and you manage it so beautifully, my dear—it’s really quite wonderful to me how well you manage it. Only I’d get rid of Imogen if I were you—that girl’s too flighty. Otherwise—well—as I said——” (She seemed to lose the thread of her thought, then picked it up again.) “It’s a delightful house—quite impressive—though



I never can reconcile myself to using rugs altogether instead of carpets. I suppose they *are* easier to keep clean. Everything's in perfect taste. And so costly. But not ostentatious. Oh, no, not at all. No one's more pleased than I that Harleth's been so successful. So very successful."

She paused and waited for some comment. Poor Janey Prentice; there had been so many years of constant interruptions and silencings from her dour old father that she could not get used to any gentler treatment.

Marcia Crossey smiled a proud little smile and touched her aunt's arm affectionately. "He *has* done wonderfully well, Aunt Janey. Even his father didn't think he could put through that big Surety and Finance Company all alone. Oh, me! I'm almost afraid of all this money. It's too much. It's sort of smothering to think of. I love my new house, but sometimes it seems to force me under an everlasting tyranny of just *things*."

"Yes, yes, I see what you mean," said her aunt, "I've felt that way myself. Indeed, if it weren't for the house in Chicago, and all of Mother's and Father's furniture and silver and linen that I couldn't bear to have touched or taken out of their place, I'd move everything and come and live near you. Things tyrannize over us that way. Just the possession of chairs and tables and all sorts of inanimate bits of

stuff makes us alter and adapt our whole lives quite away from what we'd like. I've seen it many times. Well, well—as I was saying, now that I'm leaving, and on the way to Hot Springs, and Julia Marlitt waiting for me there and all, I just wanted you to know that I've enjoyed every minute of my visit, and—though of course I've never married and may not understand marriage so thoroughly as those who've weathered through it—yet I do think, my dear, that you've managed extremely well. It's so easy for a woman to create friction where a man has a restless, masterful temperament like Harleth's and is so good-looking and attractive, and though of course ever so many women manage their husbands and it seems to be quite all right, not many of them contrive to do it and keep the romance going at the same time." She smiled benevolently on her niece and returned the pressure of her hand. "And that's where I think you're so wonderful. You don't mind my saying so, do you?"

The colour in Marcia's cheeks deepened a little but her eyes were serene. Aunt Janey's tactlessness was an old story and always a harmless one. "It's very nice of you to tell me, I think," she said, adding gaily: "And it's all due to your bringing up, you know. Where'd I be without that?"

"I like to tell people all the nice things I think about them," went on Miss Prentice, gratified,

"and particularly those who are nearest to me. Of course, Marcia, you primarily, and Harleth and Baby secondarily are all I've got in the world. I won't count Cousin Virginia. She's too impossible since she had the third operation; I smell ether and see surgeon's knives gleaming frightfully every time I talk with her. Disgusting! Marcia—look, dear, quickly please—did I bring my large salts bottle? I can't do without it on the train."

Marcia hastened to dig about among Miss Prentice's mass of travelling impedimenta in search of the wanted salts bottle.

"I wish you had Bocock with you," she said, worriedly. Bocock was Miss Prentice's maid who had been sent on with the large luggage the day before.

'It makes me too nervous to travel with Bocock,' answered Miss Prentice. "She gets car-sick and she never quite knows how to manage in the dining car. She ~~fancies~~ she is being 'put upon,' as she calls it, by the waiters, and I have to make endless explanations to the conductor and the head waiter, and she glowers and . . . well, it isn't helpful. But if I send her on the day before, she has to adjust matters herself, and I am spared all of it, and she's always all unpacked and ready for me when I get there. Oh, it's really an excellent plan, Marcia, though it took me years to hit on it. There—there's

the salts. Now I'll take it right in my hand. And my little bag and my jewel case. I shall hold all those tight in my hands all the way to the Springs except when I'm asleep."

The car slid softly up to the station platform and Wasson, the elegant but morose chauffeur, descended, opened the door, and loaded himself, in a detached, disapproving way, with bags, coats, rugs, umbrellas, and all the rest of Miss Prentice's belongings. They made a mighty armful. The two women got out of the car and walked around the platform to wait for the train, and Miss Prentice clung forlornly to Marcia's arm. She felt a little timid and tearful—her chronic state when starting on a journey. Also she had something on her mind which she wanted intensely to say, and did not know how to get at it. Her uncertainty kept her talking trivialities until the train had rolled in, but at the car steps she plunged. She turned and whispered with nervous vehemence into Marcia's ear:

"I'd never ask that Templeton woman into my house again if I were you. Good-bye, dear—dearest girl—always so kind to me; good-bye—write very soon."

Then, with a quick dab of a kiss at Marcia's cheek, she hurried confusedly up into the car.

Wasson had managed to get everything on board and in her drawing room, and through the two

layers of window Marcia could see her clutching the salts bottle and her jewel case and waving them both in farewell. Her face showed mingled emotions—relief and excitement that she had said that last word, and fear lest it should make Marcia unhappy. Marcia hastened to reassure her by smiling warmly and throwing her a kiss. But as the train pulled out the younger woman turned away with a quick sigh. Aunt Janey, for all of her vagueness, had put her finger on a very sore spot in Marcia's heart.

The superb Wasson was waiting with superb patience by the open door of the limousine, but as she turned, Marcia caught sight of Curtis Jennings at the other end of the platform, and she went eagerly down to him. Here was an antidote for all depression. When he saw her coming he hurried to meet her, and his round, heavy face lightened with unmistakable rejoicing at the chance meeting.

"Been seeing Aunt Janey off?" he asked, grinning meaningfully, but not unkindly.

"Yes, she's gone," answered Marcia, "I wish you'd been here a minute or two earlier to say good-bye to her. You won her heart to such a scandalous extent by sending her those flowers when she had tonsilitis that she's lamented ever since that she wasn't young enough to set her cap at you. But what are you doing up here in the middle of the

to leave the eighteenth open. We're going to give a big dinner, with dancing afterward. The biggest party we've tried."

"Why the sudden outburst into festivity?"

"Harleth didn't want to have a big party while Aunt Janey was with us—she does get on his nerves—and before that Baby was sick, and before *that* we were getting settled and the house wasn't all done inside, and so—really, this is the first chance we've had. You'll surely come? I'm going to have lots of pretty girls. Is that sufficient bait for a determined bachelor?"

"Have lots of pretty married women," advised Curtis; "they're much safer for a bachelor to play round with."

"You talk like a society play. If I were not such a very pretty young married woman myself, I might be offended."

"Oh, you see I counted on that," said Curtis, twinkling. "But hark, fair one—dost wish to do me a great favour?"

"I'll do anything for you—anything but listen to a description of the new cow barn."

"I've no business to ask it," hesitated Curtis, suddenly serious, though trying to be casual, "but would you, on this one occasion, omit Leila Templeton? You know I do *not* want to be married off willy-nilly, without the slightest regard to my inclinations in the

matter; and honestly—the last few times—well,
. . . Leila is getting to be a little bit *rather*."

Colour flew again, a lovely signal of unexpressed emotion, in Marcia's cheeks. "I'll see that you're protected, even if I do ask Leila," she said. "But aren't you hard on her? She's *got* to marry—they've hardly any money now and it's horrid for her to live in that little West-Side apartment. She's always been so attractive and had such a good time before, and heaps of people aren't nice to her at all since they've been poor. I'm sorry for her."

"I'm not," said Curtis, doggedly. "She's a man-eater. She's a trouble-maker. She's the sort who, when she wants *something*, doesn't care how much it costs someone else, so long as she gets it. I don't see how you can stand her."

"Oh, well," said Marcia, taking refuge in lightness, "from childhood's earliest hours, you know. She was awfully nice to me when we were at boarding school together. I can't forget that it was at her house that I met Harleth. But I must run along—do see how furious Wasson is for having to wait for me. Isn't he impressive? Remember, Curt—the eighteenth."

"And you remember Sunday which is much nearer and therefore more important. Luncheon, or supper, or tea—or anything," called Curtis after her as she stepped into the waiting car.

He stood still and looked after it. To those who saw him he appeared a rather thickset, good-natured, youngish man, without a suggestion of imagination or sentiment, so perfectly does the flesh conceal the soul. In reality he was so much in love with Marcia Crossey that the sight of her was delicate torture, and what he had just said to her was an attempt to make a way for her to escape certain conditions which he knew must be hard and humiliating. If he could spare her the presence of Leila Templeton under her roof, it was ample excuse, to him, for speaking of a woman as he had done.

To a certain extent Marcia Crossey recognized this. She was aware that he was trying to make it easy for her to get out of having Leila in her house again, but she did not know the motive that prompted him. To her Curtis Jennings was a dear, commonplace, useful friend, but nothing more; and that he adored her she would not have believed, even if he himself had avowed it. Nor would any one else among all the people who knew them both, so well had he concealed his constant heart. What he had said to-day she set down to his loyal friendship, which had always (she thought) been flavoured with a boyish, defensive quality—a blundering chivalry—no less fine for being at times a little heavy. To-day it had embarrassed her.

“First Aunt Janey and then Curt,” she said to

herself as she drove away. "Oh, I know what they mean. Why will Harleth do things that make people sorry for me? And he isn't interested in her, really; it's just that she manœuvres, and makes it seem so—and he's careless—and it amuses him. He's got far too much taste to be caught by any such obvious siren as Leila—even if he didn't care anything for me." She frowned a little. "But it was dear and thoughtful of Curt. He'd cut himself up into neat little bits for Harleth and me. I do think he's the best—and the kindest—"

Her thoughts were suddenly distracted by a sight of Wasson at the wheel, indicating by the rigid set of his shoulders and the violent spite with which he honked the horn, how displeased he was with his mistress's loitering.

"Some day," mused Marcia, "I shall try Wasson's autocratic soul too far and he'll discharge me—at least he'll make leaving a stern reproof. But he'll not go so long as Imogen stays with me."

For Wasson—as the household, both above and below stairs well knew—was the utter slave of Imogen, Marcia's personal maid, more because Imogen was the first woman who had ever flouted and laughed at him than by reason of her charm. She was an ugly, dark little monkey of an Englishwoman, with a constantly expressed scorn of men. She had been maid to one of Christabel Pankhurst's lieuten-

ants before coming to America, and she had 'absorbed the militant phrases of sex-antagonism with an accurate enthusiasm, less from belief in suffrage than from discovering that her stinging invectives were a powerful attraction to "followers" and a distinction in the servants' hall.

Marcia Crossey thought a little bit of Imogen and her amusing ways and from Imogen her mind dwelt on the other servants and the whole system of running her house, which she had built up slowly and carefully. It was such a big house, this new one, and there were so many more people needed for it than she had ever had before that it had been a real labour to adjust hours and duties into a working arrangement which was effective and yet not burdensome. Harleth's mother had helped her with the sort of welcome advice that leaves the advisee free to follow or disregard. Harleth had not helped at all. He spoiled the servants abominably, being either too exacting or too lax, and always careless of their rights and their feelings. Yet, if they liked him at all, they gave him a whole-hearted devotion, and ministered to his vagaries with an amused tolerance and resignation that was very human, and that Marcia found diverting even when it interfered with her own even rule.

A certain feeling of well-being stole over Marcia Crossey as she reflected on these things. She leaned

back still more easily against the cushions of the car. After all, she *was* fortunate. Baby was quite well again after anxious days and nights; the house was just the sort of house she had always dreamed of; the neighbourhood was friendly and kind and jolly; Harleth's affairs had prospered beyond all right of expectation; and since even small blessings should not be forgotten, Aunt Janey's visit was happily over for another couple of years. If only Harleth—— But there—Harleth was Harleth and she couldn't change him. She had long ago learned that she must love his faults if she was going to love him at all. And, of course, no husband is perfect. She had only to look among her friends to be assured of that. But if at times he would only seem to be grown up; if he would only help her a little in building their lives together; if he would only see that he must take some responsibility for their happiness, instead of leaving all the concessions and adjustments and harmonizings to her! But in these things he was still like a little boy, and a little boy *au naturel* is apt to be selfish and greedy for pleasure and to have a strong preference for doing those things which ought not to be done. Leila Templeton, for instance, was a shining symbol of this characteristic of Harleth's. There was a certain consolation to be found in considering her no more than that.

Certainly there had been others before Leila to whom

Harleth had overdone the agreeable, but there was a certain quality in his teasing, caressing nonsense with Leila—that last time she had been at the house—that had put an annoying edge on it. Marcia knew that she would have minded it less if Curt Jennings and Aunt Janey had not been there to see. They had been obviously indignant—Curt a little contemptuous. Marcia had wanted to cry out to them that it was only Harleth's way—that he'd behaved exactly the same (though that was not literally true) with half a dozen pretty women before Leila. Instead, she had sat still and talked and been as cool and natural as she could—while inside herself hating it. Angry, too—superior saintliness not being her line. She did not like to remember how much she had hated it and how angry she had been.

But Wasson was stopping at the door, and she was at home. She threw away her troubling thoughts with determination. After all, Leila and her like were just toys to Harleth, foolish, inconsequential amusements for a moment. She *must* believe that, she told herself, and she *must* take comfort in that belief. She had sense with her sweetness, Marcia Crossey.

She stepped quickly out of the car and went into the house—her perfect, her delightful house. It was still so new and vivid to her that she could not enter it without looking about to enjoy it. They had

done, in some ways, the conventional architectural thing. There was a wide hall, a spacious curving staircase leading to a balcony above the hall, and from the entrance to the stairs the eye was intrigued with gracious vistas into the rooms all about. With this, however, any likeness to the houses of their friends ceased, for the colouring was all subdued and mellowed sunlight, an effect achieved through the insistent use of yellow in tones of palest amber to tarnished bronze. It was too restrainedly done to be affected or tiresome—the colour was picked up here and there by tawny tones of old French walnut, by ribbony deeps of last century satinwood, by a length of Imperial Chinese brocade, by an iridescent bubble of Venetian glass, by topaz gauze against the windows through which the light fell clearly, yet warmed and enriched, while everywhere were flowers which took away the last suspicion of artful art. Marcia hated whole-souledly the decorative jumble of Jacobean hall, lacquer and cane reception room, Louis Quinze drawing room and Georgian dining room displayed by the average house she knew. She had essayed her golden house in fear and trembling, but the marvellous rightness of it now that it was complete was a vindication of her daring. Harleth had pooh-poohed it when she had first brought forward her idea. He had wanted to give the whole thing to a super-expensive decorator and

let him work his will, but Marcia had argued that the house wouldn't be theirs at all, in that case. Now that the thing was done and had turned out so well, he had become immensely proud of it. Marcia had smiled—a little wistfully—over his naïve face-about. Why hadn't he trusted her taste at first and helped her with it?

Yet never in her moments of questioning dissatisfaction with Harleth did she lose sight of all he had done for her by loving her and making her love him. When they were married, five years before, she was a very unhappy, restless girl of nineteen who had led the dullest and most repressed of lives in the home of her grandfather and her aunt. Old Erasmus Prentice was a tyrant with his womenfolk. His only son had driven him into a black rage by dying just a little while after marrying the girl his father had forbidden him even to see. His unwanted daughter-in-law further enraged him by following her young husband shortly to the grave and leaving a little posthumous daughter—Marcia—to the bleakness of the old man's care. His other child, Janey, he had never liked, for she was plain and timid and awkward, but he made her keep his big house as best she could and care for the little motherless grandchild on the most parsimonious of allowances from his wealth. She did her ineffectual best to bring up the little Marcia in a

way to give least offense to their domestic Fee-fum.

But granddaughter Marcia was no meek daughter Janey, as Erasmus Prentice soon found out. The flare of defiance that had resulted in her father's marriage burnt on steadily in her child nature and stony old Erasmus might draw his beetling brows together and bark terrifyingly at her all he liked, but in the end it got him nowhere. As she grew older, though he would not have owned it aloud, the old man found it easier to give in to her wishes than to oppose them, and so he sent her away—to high-priced schools that taught her little beyond a few graceful accomplishments, but where she was at least out of his sight. When she came home to the great uncomfortable mid-Victorian house, he ignored her as much as he could. It was a harsh atmosphere for a young thing—harsh and lonely and warping. She went back to it as infrequently as she could, and caught at any invitation that kept her away from it.

And so, visiting in holiday time at the New York home of Leila Templeton, one of her school friends, she had met Harleth Crossey and with that meeting the whole tune and temper of her life were changed. The love he inspired in her ripened and sweetened her as sunny weather after rain ripens and sweetens the yellow nectarines on the wall. In the warmth of his passionate and generous affection, and in the

well-tempered ease of the normal, kindly circle of people to which he brought her, she flowered into amazing beauty and charm.

Harleth's father and mother frankly doted on her from the first, welcoming her as a real daughter, and the coming of Baby had completed their content with her. They gave up their house in New York and moved within easy motoring distance of the new grandson, yet were tactful enough not to move too near, only just within reach of the marvellous infant. They cared very little for the beautiful new house that Harleth had built. Indeed, the elder Crossey went so far as to say that it was a great pity that Harleth had not had to work for twenty years for what he had achieved in five. "Easy success is bad soul discipline," he quoted dryly.

The two old people were foremost in Marcia's thoughts as she entered her home. She had not yet made her daily visit by telephone on her mother-in-law on account of the flurry of Aunt Janey's departure. Well, she would do it the very first thing after she had seen Baby, who must, of course, take precedence over everyone. Even in her haste she gave a satisfying look around the hall as she went through; it *was* a house of delight to the eye. Her moment of gratified observance was fated to interruption. Sako, the Japanese butler, bowed before her and exposed a domestic catastrophe.

"So sorry to disturb. All Mista Crossa vermouth gone. Order have sent. No come. What can do?"

Marcia paused, her hand on the stair rail. "Buy it out here, just this once, Sako," she suggested. "Then to-morrow you can have it sent out from town."

Sako made gestures of despair, which contrasted humorously with his fixed, respectful smile. "Have try. One—two—three—four place. All say no have. Mista Crossa be much anger. Will say should not have let stock run so low. But some bottle he broke when carpenter fix shellufs in wine cellar. What can do? Order no come," he repeated, urgently.

"If you've tried all the shops here, I don't know where we can get any unless we borrow, or send out to the Country Club," said Marcia, hastily reviewing possibilities. "And it's ridiculous to do either. Let it go, Sako. Don't mind. Mr. Crossey will simply have to drink something else or make a cocktail without vermouth. It doesn't matter."

"Mista Crossa be much anger," said Sako again. Beneath the fixed smile now appeared a fearful anxiety.

"Oh, no—no," said Marcia, shaking her head. "I will speak to him—I will tell him about it. It will be all right."

Sako bowed. "Plenty Scotch, plenty othe' li-quors," he said in the tone of one seeking to reassure himself, and then betook himself out of sight.

Marcia shrugged and turned again to the stairs. "Poor Sako," she murmured, "he fears the worst if Harleth's deprived of his cocktail." And she wished that Sako did not have such good reason for his apprehension.

To get away from that thought she hurried her steps. Perhaps she would reach the nursery before Baby had wakened from his nap, so that she could make him ready for his afternoon outing with her own hands. But she was too late. Nurse had fore-stalled her and Harleth Junior was all ready for outdoors save for his sweater and cap and Nurse was busy with these, secretly rejoicing that she had been able thus to steal a march on Marcia, because Baby was her jealously adored idol.

"Master Harleth was so eager to get out, ma'am," she said, demurely, as Marcia came in; "I thought it best not to wait for you."

"Nurse—you fraud!" said Marcia. "I've a good mind to undress him and dress him all over again just to punish you. Come here to mother, blessed, and give her a big, big hug!"

She held out her arms and Harleth Junior came with wavering, unsteady eagerness toward her, crowing with delight. He was just beginning to

walk, but as yet he had refused even to try to talk, though Nurse declared that he understood every word that was said to him, and Marcia ardently believed her. When he was still a yard away, his mother swooped down on him and caught him to her, rumpling and tickling him, while he squealed with pleasure and flung his plump pink hands about trying to catch the shining buckle on her hat and the little diamond clasp at her throat. The game ended as it always did—with Marcia holding her little son close against her while he pressed warm, wet baby kisses on her cheek. Nurse stood by, eyeing him with rapture, but ready to snatch him away at her very first chance.

“Oh, dear,” said Marcia, surrendering him at last, reluctantly, “how I do hate to think that he’ll ever grow up and love some other woman more than his mother. I’m beginning to hate my daughter-in-law even now, Nurse. Here, give me his sweater and cap. Isn’t he a perfect darling in them! Now don’t keep him out too long; and be sure to remember his glass of milk.”

“When did I ever forget it, ma’am?” asked Nurse with smouldering indignation; and she swept herself and her charge grandly away, forthwith.

CHAPTER II

MARCIA left the nursery and went on to her own sitting room, which Harleth jocularly called a hybrid office-boudoir. Here, at a generous desk, she directed all the business of her household; here were her latest books, her private telephone, her letters, her unfinished bits of knitting and embroidery. She dropped down at the desk and took up the telephone, her right hand mechanically straightening the small litter of bills, price-lists, catalogues, and other unimportant papers before her while she waited for the connection.

The dowager Mrs. Crossey was waiting for the call and listened avidly to the daily news budget: Aunt Janey's departure, Baby's health and his afternoon airing, Marcia's new frock, Curt Jennings's invitation for Sunday, the plans for the forthcoming dinner-dance.

Then Marcia must listen to her in turn. Crossey *père's* rheumatism was still bad, and they were wondering if the new electrical treatment wouldn't do him good; the pet Pekingese had had an attack of indigestion and they had sent for the vet.; the new

cook was rather better than they had hoped, though with ideas of her own about milk toast; Mother Crossey was hoping that Marcia and Baby would come over to-morrow when they could talk at leisure about the dinner-dance and all other matters of mutual importance.

"And Harleth—he's as usual?" asked his mother at last.

"Oh, yes, Mother," answered Marcia—and then, rather guiltily: "Of course he's awfully busy, but only last night he was saying that he must come over to see you; that he couldn't stay away much longer."

"Don't excuse him," replied Mother Crossey, whimsically, "I know Harleth, my dear. But I'd rather have him for a son and have him neglect me in the shameful way he does than have any other son in the world. I'm always sure that he loves me—and that's better than ever so many duty visits."

"You, too," thought Marcia, as she put the telephone aside. "You, too! It's the same magic Harleth lays on all of us." She gave her shoulders a shake for courage and addressed herself resolutely to the writing of a couple of waiting notes, hunted out the address of a woman who made most original favours, and then went at the task of preparing her list of guests for the affair of the eighteenth. She intended to go over it with Harleth in the evening

and have it finished. It was high time to get the invitations sent.

There were various small interruptions, but she worked on steadily until it was time to dress for dinner, when the efficient Imogen appeared at the door and eyed her as reproachfully as a bad conscience. The look was enough and Marcia dropped her pencil.

"Is Mr. Crossey at home yet?" she asked Imogen while her dress was being unhooked.

"Yes, mem," replied Imogen demurely; then, rolling her most expressive eyes: "Mr. Crossey was driving the car himself, mem. Wasson *will* be in a stew."

Harleth Crossey confirmed this interesting news item a moment later when he came hurrying into Marcia's room on the way to his own. He stopped beside her dressing table and stooped to kiss her bare white shoulder.

"You get younger every minute," he said. "You'll soon be as young as Baby and then I'll have my hands full with two infants to take care of. Madam, you ought to mend your ways. Oh, Marcia," he went on, chuckling, "I've offended Wasson almost beyond endurance. I drove the car up from the station myself. He'd hardly speak to me when I got out."

He dropped into a chair and shouted at the remembrance. He laughed like a boy and when he

laughed he looked like a boy, too. It was Harleth Crossey's greatest asset that whatever he did was, for the time he was doing it, his only interest in life. When he worked he worked with every bit of his brain and energy, and when he played he played as hard as he worked. He was good-looking, as even Aunt Janey had admitted; indeed he was much more so than her mild spinsterial words intimated. He had clean-coloured brown hair and restless hazel eyes that slanted at the corners and gave him an odd, mischievous look when he smiled. But it was the rush and impact of his abounding vitality, and his magnetic aliveness that made him noticeable, wherever he was. He could no more be overlooked than can contact with electric current.

"Golly! I'm thankful Aunt Janey is no longer in our midst," he went on. "I shan't have her disapproving eye fixed on my cocktail or my poor little innocent glass of wine at dinner with that you're-headed-for-a-drunkard's-grave expression. I wish, Marcia, that if Aunt Janey must disapprove of me she would conceal it better."

"Just by way of heaping coals of fire," said Marcia, "when she left to-day she said the nicest possible things about you. I'd tell you what she said about your looks if you weren't so vain, and I don't want Baby to grow up and find that his father is a vain person. And she said that the house was beautiful

beyond compare, and your success in business a most marvellously fine thing—or words to that effect. Indeed, the poor old dear tried very hard to say something agreeable about everything. She even said that if she could bear to uproot Grandfather's and Grandmother's furniture and pictures and silver, she'd move from Chicago and come and live near us."

Harleth dropped back in his chair in limp dismay. "Somebody's always taking the joy out of life," he murmured. "Here I was feeling so superlatively thankful that she had gone, and now you tell me she thinks she might come and live near us! Well, I warn you that if she does I shall promptly emigrate to the South Pole or thereabout. Great Scott! Is that clock right?" He pointed to the little rose enamel clock on Marcia's dressing table.

"Slow, if anything," warned Marcia. "You'll have to hurry. It may be all right to risk offending Wasson, but we can't take liberties with Cook. Oh, wait a second; I've got the list for the eighteenth made up, and we'll go over it after dinner."

Not until after he had gone did she realize that she had told him nothing of the vermouth tragedy, but then, she reflected, she would probably be down before him, and would still have a chance to forestall any reproof to Sako. But her dressing was delayed because Nurse came in and reported two tiny red spots like an incipient rash on Baby's left ankle, and

that drew her at once to the nursery. It all ended in making her very late to dinner and she could hear Harleth's voice raised in annoyance as she came down.

"There isn't a drop of vermouth in the house," he fairly snapped at her as she appeared. Gone was all his boyish charm—but his energy was still there.

"I meant to tell you, but I forgot it," she answered, mindful of a cringing Sako in the background. "It was ordered, but they didn't send it and we couldn't get any out here. The carpenter broke some, that's why we ran short."

The scowling crease between Harleth's eyebrows deepened.

"It's the limit!" he said, still angrily. "It's the only thing that ever gives me a bit of appetite."

"In that case, you'd better see a doctor," said Marcia. Then in a carefully uninterested voice: "Aren't you overdoing this cocktail thing a little, anyway? Perhaps Aunt Janey's drunkard's-grave expression was right."

Harleth gave his head an impatient jerk. "Bring me some pinchbottle Scotch," he said to Sako, and when it came he poured himself a doubly stiff drink. Marcia noticed the amount, but did not comment on it—if she should, he would only take more, she knew. Instead, she asked, sympathetically, "Are you very tired to-night, old boy?"

Harleth pulled a grimace over his Scotch and then

sat down at table. Having got what he wanted, the barometer was going up.

"Oh, no, not specially," he said, almost amiably now. "What bully soup. That reminds me—whom do you suppose I saw in town to-day?"

"Who?" asked Marcia, mechanically. She was noticing, as she had noticed before, and always with a quiver of her heart, how the liquor he took changed the character of Harleth's face—coarsened the lines about his mouth and brought to his eyes an unpleasant, hard sort of gaiety. Dull colour had crept up on his cheeks. While Sako was pouring his sauterne he looked at it—greedily. He waited to taste the wine before he answered.

"Ah-h-h, that's good," he said, appreciatively, and set the glass down. "Why, I saw Leila Templeton. I told her all about our party, and she says she'll surely come."

"I wish you hadn't felt so descriptively hospitable," said Marcia. "I'd just about decided that we wouldn't ask her at all."

"It's too late now—unless we change the date or do something desperate. What's the matter with lovely Leila? She's great fun. I went up to the Ritz to lunch with Vail, and he didn't show up, but Leila was sitting in the lounge, so I asked her to join me. That's why I had so much time to talk. She looked stunning, too. It's queer—clothes that

would look fast on any other woman are simply Frenchy and smart on her."

"That's true enough," admitted Marcia. "Leila could always put on the most daring and extreme things and look, as you say, merely excessively smart. I think it's because she walks so well, and has such a manner. She's an artist in fashion—for her own type, I mean."

Harleth stared.

"I suppose I shall never be able to understand women—not even you. Most especially you, I mean. Now you're an old friend of Leila's; she's been here dozens of times; you've stayed with her time and again; you admit she's attractive, and smart, and all that sort of thing; there isn't, apparently, a shadow of anything unpleasant in your mind against her; yet you plan to give the biggest party you've ever attempted and leave her out. It's too much for my poor, feeble masculine intellect."

"I can see that it might puzzle your alleged feeble masculine mind," said Marcia, wishing she could tell him the truth, "but—well, I'm getting a little bored with Leila, Harleth. I can't get awfully excited about her clothes and her suitors as I used to do, and naturally she doesn't care very much about my humdrum domestic existence. We've grown away from each other." Mentally she added: "I hope that sounds convincing to him. It doesn't to me."

"Well, I've gone and spilled the beans this time," said Harleth, blithely. "She's coming, unless she's headed off by battle, murder, or sudden death. My guilty conscience even tells me that I told her you expected her to stay over the week-end, the eighteenth being Thursday."

"That was indeed a happy thought," said Marcia. "You really outdid yourself to-day. Please try to remember, after this, that *Leila bores me* and I can't be bothered with her. Get that bit by heart—please, old dear. I'll forgive you this once; but never again! If I have to have her, I might just as well make a little house party of it and ask Belle Percy. Think up a couple of nice men, won't you?"

"Why not Curt Jennings? He ought to be thankful to leave his bachelor halls once in a while."

Marcia wouldn't betray Curt's protest against Leila. "Oh, we can ask him," she said, "but I don't believe he'll come, he's so enamoured of the farm. He wants us to come over on Sunday and see the plans for his new stables. Isn't he funny! I never expected to behold Curt in the guise of a country gentleman."

A silence fell on them. Harleth was remembering some of the amusing daring things Leila Templeton had said to him; they weren't worth while telling Marcia—indeed they wouldn't sound funny if he repeated them. It was the little flirt of her head and

the droop and flutter of her lashes with her eyes shining under them, her quick gestures, and the droll little roll and slur of her words that had given point and substance and fascination to what she had said. It is the sort of thing that even the best of husbands knows would meet with but faint appreciation even from the most liberal-minded of wives.

Leila was very much in Marcia's mind also. She had not wanted Leila to come, but she had learned to accept the unexpected where Harleth was not concerned, and she had long ago discovered the philosophical fact that to avoid an unpleasant situation is far more unpleasant than to face it. Moreover, she was not a victim of petty jealousy for herself, whether it concerned Leila or any other woman. It was for Harleth that she was jealous; she did not want him to appear not quite . . . fine . . . in his own house. It made people . . . imagine things. Witness Aunt Janey and Curt Jennings, no longer ago than to-day. "But I won't be silly and peevish and act as if I cared," she told herself; and she came back from her mental explorations to hear Harleth telling Sako to bring cognac with the coffee. She could not help a slight, instantly restrained gesture of discouragement. That was one of the things that had come with his success—a constant need of stimulant.

"And he doesn't really need it," thought Marcia

resentfully. "He's taking more than usual this evening because he knows I don't like him to do it. Oh, poor, headstrong, foolish little boy—that's all he is." And she was suddenly tenderly maternal and pitiful of him.

"What are you thinking about, looking so solemn?" asked Harleth, suddenly. Then (a spark of laughter coming into his slanted, faun-like eyes): "Oh, I see—you're peeved because I didn't offer you the cognac."

"Nasty stuff," she said, laughing back at him. "Give me ipecac, instead, or that deadly dose Aunt Janey used to force on me—castor oil and laudanum. No; I wasn't envying your disgusting orgy of strong drink. I was thinking about my new frock. I've been frightfully extravagant and I glory in my shame."

"Delighted!" quoth Harleth. "Come along and let's see that list. I know who's going to be the belle of the ball, all right, all right—new dress or no new dress." And he put his arm around her and foxtrotted her all the way to the library while Sako gazed after them in wonder.

Once within the library, beyond Sako's eyes, he stopped and held her tight for a moment. "You're the most beautiful woman in the world—and the best—and the dearest—and the sweetest—and the loveliest. You know I love you, don't you, Mrs. Marcia darling?"

She did not answer in words, but turned her head and put a little kiss on his coat sleeve. Leila and all the rest of her pack of worries fled precipitately. Nothing in the world mattered when Harleth was like this.

CHAPTER III

EVERY woman has at least one—but usually only one—dependable woman friend, who may be alliteratively described as a companion, a confidante, and a comfortable cushion. This was the rôle played by Belle Percy to Marcia Crossey, and never before, it seemed to Marcia, had she been so glad to see Belle's calm, plump face and understanding blue eyes as to-day. She met her guest at the very door.

"Was the train late? I thought you'd never come."

"It was late," said Belle, pushing away her veil. "A freight train off the track, I think. And I sitting there as impatient as a six-year-old on her way to dancing school. I really thought the eighteenth would never come. Oh—I looked all about for Leila, but I didn't see her. Is she here?"

"She'll come on the next train I think," said Marcia. She almost added that that was the train Harleth would take, hence——

"I'm thankful to get here at last," went on Belle. "They burned some of the freight train beside the

track—a nervous proceeding. But how *wonderful* the house is! I've never seen anything so lovely."

"The florists' men are almost through," said Marcia. "Come and look it over, and then we'll go and see Baby; and *then* I'll let you have twenty minutes' rest before you dress."

"How big and open it all is when you see it cleared out like this. The spacing's very good. And those garlands, Marcia! They were your own idea, I know."

"Yes; aren't they jolly, looped like that? Everything's cleared for the dancing except the dining room and the library. The musicians are to be on the balcony; we shan't be able to see them at all from below, but they can be heard perfectly. We're going to dance in the enclosed porch, too; I like it out there best of all."

"So do I," declared Belle. "Think of having a fountain and a fireplace going in any one room. And oh, the flowers! It's just like a garden out here only more comfortable; no mosquitoes and no rough, scrunchy gravel paths. How I hate gravel paths!"

"I wanted it to look like a garden," said Marcia. "If I'd known you were such a realist I might have put in a few mosquitoes and gravel paths to complete the picture. Observe the arbour, if you please—my masterpiece. But come; Baby will be in bed and fast asleep, and I do want you to see him before that.

Just ~~think~~, Belle—his eyes are getting darker; distinctly darker!"

"How inexpressibly thrilling," mimicked Belle. "Are you quite certain you're not deceiving me? I can't believe you're telling the truth until I see for myself. And you, Marcia—I'm disappointed in you. I had expected you to have the regulation haggard hostess look. It's very mean of you not to, for I was planning to outshine you with my calm and healthy expression. And oh, my dear—I've lost three pounds."

"Since when?"

"Since last year, if you will ask unnecessary questions. But I can see that you care nothing about my becoming a sylph; you're still thinking of Baby's eyes." She put an affectionate arm about Marcia. "It's such a joke," she went on, "you being a married lady with a baby! You don't look a second older than the day you came into my room in C dormitory to borrow my yellow sweater for one of the seniors. Was I not the popular creature so long as the yellow sweater held out? I never got a chance to wear it myself."

As they went up the stairs, arms intertwined, school-girl fashion, Marcia said: "I'm glad you got here before Leila. I'll tell you honestly, Belle, I wasn't going to ask her at all. I'm *fed up* with Leila. But Harleth met her in town one day and

carefully told her about the whole affair and said we wanted her to come—that we wanted her particularly. He probably made her think the success of the party rested on her presence.”

“He wouldn’t need to tell her—she’d think so anyway,” said Belle, cheerfully. “Meow! Meow! Well, I, too, have had a little too much Leila, ever and anon. But I couldn’t tell that to any one else I know, for it would be promptly said that all plain women dislike beauties on principle. Not that I think Leila is a beauty—but she is certainly by way of giving that impression. I hope you spoke sharply to Harleth.”

Marcia laughed. “I’d like to see any one speak sharply to Harleth and gain anything by it. Nay, nay, you do not know my wiles. I dissembled. I said, amiably but firmly, that Leila bored me, but that since she was asked she would have to come and therefore it was Harleth’s part to rush around and get some eligible men to stay at the house, too, and thus have her off my hands.”

“And he did!”

“No—the wretch! He promised me faithfully he would, and I reminded him twice. But it was time wasted. Curt Jennings wouldn’t come. It was all we could do to get him to promise to come to the party. He’s afraid Leila will marry him some time when he’s off his guard. Harleth wouldn’t try for

any one else—so I'm afraid we're in for a week-end of Leila unadulterated." She flung open the door of the nursery. "There!—the real personage of this household!"

Harleth Junior was in his bed and in an enchanting state of drowsiness—eyelids drooped heavily, rosy mouth curved into utter relaxed content. One hand was thrown above his head in a royal gesture. The lights were dimmed. Nurse was in attendance, torn between her desire that her monarch should not be disturbed, and her eagerness that he should be seen and admired. Belle and Marcia hung over him, murmuring, and he opened and closed his eyes and smiled sleepily at them, but did not really waken. They would have delayed beside him, but there was a sudden commotion below—hurrying feet, a staccato voice, laughter. Marcia turned to Belle.

"Leila's here," she said. "Come, let me take you to your room and then I'll go down to meet her."

Leila met her halfway—delicately slim—the complete *boulevardière* from her severe little hat and her clicking earrings to her high-heeled buckled pumps. She held out slender hands—she was slender all over, but it was a slenderness of live and supple flesh without so much as an intimation of bones or angles. If you have seen Ruth St. Denis's arms in the Cobra Dance, you have seen the effect that Leila Templeton tried—and with extraordinary success—to achieve

with her body. Her head was small and her hair was straight and sleek and shining. Her eyes were the least bit hard—when she wasn't animated. She held out her chin a little because the line of it was better so. Most notable of all, she had studied and worked at her effects with such infinite care and having found them had made them so much a part of herself that she was not conscious of them.

"Oh, don't bother to come down," she said, kissing Marcia lightly on the cheek (she had no chance to kiss her on the lips), "Harleth's playing the attentive host and bringing me up. I've a very splurgy new frock I'm going to wear to-night and it will take me hours to get it on!" She opened her mouth only a very little as she talked, because it was the greatest defect of her face that her teeth were neither quite even nor quite white, though she had had everything possible done to make them so.

"It's sweet to have you," said Marcia, lying smoothly and submitting to the kiss. "Belle's here; she came on the train just before yours."

"I waited for Harleth," avowed Leila; "or, rather, he waited for me. We had to run like mad to catch the train and my bag flew open so that I left a trail of handkerchiefs and powder puffs and lip sticks and my little mirror all through the waiting room."

"And oddly enough," said Harleth, following them, "all of these necessities of life were picked up

and restored to their owner, as the train pulled out, by half a dozen or more obliging male by-standers. I think she did it on purpose."

"It wouldn't be the first time," said Marcia. "Run along, Harleth, and don't tag. Leila and Belle and I are going to have a five-minute chatterfest before we go at the serious business of dressing."

"Remember all those dances you promised me, Leila," Harleth called after them.

"Don't let's bother about Belle now," said Leila, turning to Marcia. "I want all the time I can get to dress, truly. How are you, dear? You're looking awfully fagged—I suppose it's the enormous bother of entertaining in the suburbs. You had courage to attempt it; I do wish you'd move into town."

"And leave my angel house? Leila, you're mad. Here's your room and there'll be a maid here in a minute to unpack for you and help you dress. Dinner isn't until eight, you know, so you have heaps of time, even if you *are* going to be a Queen of Sheba."

Marcia ran away to her own room, putting her hands to her burning cheeks. Fagged, indeed! But what was the use of being angry with Leila for an infinitesimal scratch like that. Still—it was a scratch. Unmistakable. Marcia wondered what sort of a dress Leila was going to wear; evidently it was intended to startle and overpower. Then she thought of her own dress and she did a little exultant

dance step in the wide hallway before her door.
Nothing could be lovelier than that. . . .

She was still more exultant when at last she was in it, the shimmer and sheen and softness of it draped so easily, so satisfyingly, around her and trailed off so unexpectedly into the most piquant of trains that dragged after her rippling as she walked. And there was much delicate transparency of tulle over the warm cream of her skin.—her arms—her bosom. She took up a mirror and trying to feel not too elated, examined critically the long curve of the back of her neck as it turned into the crisp waves of her hair. It is an exceptionally gratifying feeling to know that one's head is put on with just the right line at the back. And Imogen had surpassed herself with that hair. She had refused to put an ornament in it.

"No, mem," she had protested in her clipped English, "Nething! A comb or a pin would spoil it. Now—it's a drim!" She meant that it was a dream, and Marcia so understood her. As she looked at it, she was inclined to agree. It *was* a "drim."

She hesitated over her jewels. She did not have very many and for to-night nothing seemed quite lovely or unusual enough. While she was weighing a pink topaz pendant in her hand and regarding it questioningly, Harleth came into the room. He was already dressed; and in his evening clothes (ugliest uniform of our so-called civilization) he was, oddly

enough, more faun-like than ever. He was smiling as if he had a thoroughly pleasant secret.

He came up behind her, looking at her reflection in the mirror over her shoulder. He whistled between his teeth.

"Marcia," he said, "you—you're absolutely *edible!* I forbid you to wear anything else but this dress as long as you live. And, with it . . . this."

He drew his hand out of his pocket, reached up, and deftly passed something about her neck, snapped a clasp and stepped back, watching her. It was a string of pearls, rose-tinted, accurately matched, long enough to swing against the edge of her tulle *décolletage*. The clasp was a whorl of diamonds. He had not told her he was going to get it, but that was always his way with any gift, even the smallest.

"They're not so lovely as your flesh," he said, gloatingly.

"They're the most beautiful things I ever saw!" cried Marcia. "And just what I needed for this dress. How dear of you—how good—" She clung and kissed him—absurd, happy tears springing to her eyes.

"I ought to have got them for you ages ago, but I wouldn't until I could spend enough to get decent ones. I wasn't going to have you wearing stingy little pearls. You do like them, don't you?"

"Like them!" She stood away from him, and revolved like a mannequin, one hand touching the pearls, the other holding up her impudent little train. "Look at me. Are you satisfied?"

"Rather! You're the peachiest peach in the world," he told her. "I'm so sorry for all the other men—the poor devils who didn't marry you."

She flushed deliciously and slipped her hands into his. "And I'm so sorry for all the other women," she said, "the poor wretches who didn't marry you." Then she loosed her hands and bent a listening ear. "We must fly," she said. "I hear people beginning to come."

On the way downstairs they were joined by Belle, who exclaimed at sight of Marcia. "You white-and-silver angel!" she cried. "How I wish I dared wear something like that. Look at me; I'm the perfect fashion hint for Stout Ladies—black frock, long, straight lines, and all the rest of it. And yet everyone who sees me would probably guess my weight as ten pounds heavier than it really is. Oh, the misery of flesh!"

More and more of the guests were coming. There were the Dwights, she a talkative bromide and he a silent one. Then came the Reuben Joneses, somewhat oppressed by their money and their family tree, but striving to be amiable. The Raymonds followed—Ursula's blue satin gown apparently flung

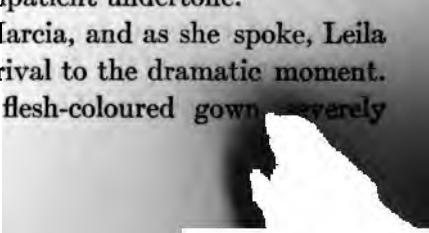
on and her hair looking as if she had never combed it, yet infinitely attractive with her whimsical face and dark-lashed, red-brown eyes, while Henry Raymond appeared behind her in the most impeccable cold correctness of features and attire. Belle whispered to Marcia that he made her think of a butler, he was so overpowering.

Tiny Morrison, blowsy and high-coloured from riding and golf, came bouncing in, accompanied by Jason Hooker, her fiancé, a quiet Beaux-Arts architect, who hated athletics as a pernicious waste of time. Curt Jennings was almost late, but came in beaming. After he had spoken to everyone, he drew away a little from the crowd that he might look at Marcia undisturbed and fill his hungry eyes with her radiance. John and Timmy Appleton—brothers, bachelors, inseparable companions and partners in business—followed Curt. Finally came the Harts, four of them—old William Hart and his wife, young William Hart and *his* wife—charming people who had had brains and breeding and money for countless generations behind them.

There was a pause. Sako hovered uneasily about the library door. "What are we waiting for?" asked Harleth in an impatient undertone.

"For Leila," said Marcia, and as she spoke, Leila entered, timing her arrival to the dramatic moment.

She had put on a flesh-coloured gown severely



plain, and so accurately toned to the hue of her neck and arms that one had to look twice to tell where it began and ended. Its scant simplicity outlined her as definitely as a bathing suit and with the most insolent innocence. It made her seem—naked. And it made all the other women look overdressed. She had put square emeralds with tiny diamonds about them in her ears, and a comb of brilliants in her smooth, shining hair, but she wore no other jewels. She looked directly toward Harleth Crossey, and as she stood there, slim and still before the velvet curtain, from her eyes to his there leaped a spark of understanding.

Then she came forward—slowly, so that everyone could see her and be shocked or pleased, according to their taste or lack of it. Mrs. Reuben Jones fumbled for her lorgnette and stared. Marcia made a gesture and Sako and his assistant entered with trays of cocktails.

This broke the spell of Leila's entrance, and the group of guests shifted and reformed, in the easy informality of people who know each other well. Timmy Appleton, always a clown, did a foolish bit of sleight of hand with his cocktail, pretending to let it fall and catching it again without spilling a drop, and everyone laughed. There was a general movement toward the dining room, and as they went Harleth managed to whisper into Leila's ear:

"Did you borrow Mary Garden's 'Aphrodite' costume?" To which she replied, with a caustic downward quirk of her red lips:

"Naughty, naughty! Better not let Marcia hear you."

Before he could say anything more they were at table and though Leila was placed where he could see her, she was too far away to speak to unless he leaned and shouted. And Marcia knew that Harleth never leaned and shouted. He never did anything that might appear ridiculous.

CHAPTER IV

IT WAS a well-planned dinner, not only as to food, but in such minor details of comfort as the lighting and the spacing of places, while the decorations drew and held the eye. A little table-fountain—two dancing nymphs in an oval marble bowl—was set in a garden of the smallest growing plants, a real garden in miniature, with Japanese cedars for trees, and flowering violets and forget-me-nots and tiny rose bushes covered with bloom. Candlesticks of white Italian ware held jade-green candles shaded by mellow parchment. It had been done with a definite idea and an accurate taste—and not over-done. From the first moment Marcia felt that things were going well. People were amused. They were talking. The men were eating everything and of course she had not expected the women to eat. She glanced quickly down at Harleth. Ursula Raymond—he always enjoyed Ursula—sat at one side of him and, at the other, Mrs. William Hart, the elder—another of his greatest favourites. He was talking at his gayest, and with that keenness with which the one voice is always listened for,

Marcia noted that his gaiety was a little too constant, a little strident. He was not eating, but he was drinking steadily. She noted, too, that his eyes were set in one direction. He was looking at Leila Templeton, who was amply aware of it.

A wave of resentment took the guard off Marcia's tongue. She turned to Curt Jennings. "What is it about Leila," she asked, "that attracts men so much? She isn't clever—she isn't sweet. She isn't, when you come right down to it, so wonderfully good-looking. So far as I can see, she entirely lacks what Barrie calls 'charrm,' in the usual acceptance of the word. What is it, Curt? Do you know?"

"Oh, yes, I know," said Curt, dryly. "I can tell you in one word—provocation. Or, sex. I don't mean that she's feminine—I mean she's female."

"Upon my word!" gasped Marcia. "Have you taken to reading Dreiser novels, Curt?"

"I admit that I was coarse," returned Curt, calmly, helping himself to salad, "but you asked me—and I answered you according to the best of my belief and opinion. Leila appeals to that primitive feeling that even the best of men possess—the desire to dominate the other sex. When a man of the so-called lower classes marries that type of woman, I believe, he frequently becomes a wife-beater. That is where the lower classes so have the advantage over their superiors in social refinements.

Leila, if properly beaten every few days, might become a true fireside companion."

"I don't know whether you're funnier when you mean to be, or when you don't mean to be," said Marcia, laughing. "I didn't intend to start you off on a tirade. It was hardly fair of me to ask that question about Leila I suppose. I'm sorry I began it."

Curt choked back his feelings fiercely. That she, his lovely, star-like Marcia, should need be sorry for anything she had said about that—that—he mentally used a descriptive noun which was not pretty. "Don't let's pursue this subject," he said. "Personally, I'm not interested."

"Personally, I am," Marcia longed to answer. "I must be, when I see Harleth looking at her like that."

She tried to tell herself that it was nothing, but she could not get away from a sudden foreboding shadow. The dinner suddenly became long and tiresome, a tax on her spirit. She was thankful when it was over and they could leave the table and go into the big, bare flower-scented rooms, where the younger set was beginning to gather for the dancing. It was a relief just to have new guests to meet, to move about and get Harleth and Leila out of her sight. Yet all the time Marcia was perfectly aware that he had joined her as soon as dinner was over and

that they had been dancing together constantly from the very first note of the music. Never before had he so completely disregarded his duties as host in his own house. It could not but be marked. And it was marked.

Belle Percy, who had been dancing with Jason Hooker, an old and comfortable friend, spoke impulsively to him about it.

"It's perfectly fiendish the way Harleth's behaving. And Leila, too. They act like a college boy and girl having their first crush. Silly—and rotten taste. I could shake them both."

"I'll tell Tiny—let her do it," smiled Jason—for Tiny's athletic prowess was a constant joke to him. "But, of course, you're quite right. Crossey's acting like a bad-mannered fool. The only thing I can see to do, though, is to play up to Mrs. Crossey and make everyone have a perfectly bully time, so that she won't worry about the party being a failure to her guests. It's a ghastly failure to her, of course, but she's a good sport. Think of a man putting a woman like her through this sort of thing. He ought to be shot."

There were a good many others who concurred with this opinion, though they did not say so. The Reuben Joneses were scandalized past repair, and the senior Harts exchanged a meaningful word or two. The men made a great showing of gallantry—

that was really indignant sympathy—to Marcia, and she did not need to stop dancing for a moment unless she wished. For the most part, she did not wish to be still. It was much easier to dance again and again and again, for while she was dancing she did not need to talk much, or to force herself into a vivacity that she knew must seem unnatural.

Harleth and Leila were quite aware of the atmosphere of disapproval that surrounded them. Leila did not care; she enjoyed that sort of thing particularly well. Harleth did not care, because between dances he had been drinking freely of the very good champagne cup which Sako had placed in the corner of the covered veranda. This, added to what he had drunk at dinner, kept him in a high and airy world of his own where the only thing that mattered was the nearness of this pliant, warm woman, who leaned to him, and answered his daring inconsequence in kind. His faun's eyes shone brilliantly and he laughed a great deal. Seen through an alcoholic mist the world became delightfully droll.

"We're having so much better time than any one else who is here," he said to Leila, at last. "I can't thank you enough for coming. The great joke of it all is that Marcia didn't intend to ask you." He laughed consumedly at the humour of that.

Leila looked at him narrowly. She saw that he was half seas over, though he could still dance.

"She wasn't going to ask me, you say?" she drew him along. "Why not, I wonder?"

"Oh, I don't remember exactly," said Harleth. "Said you were tiresome, I think, or something like that. Maybe she said you bored her. Isn't that funny!" He fairly rocked at the ridiculous idea.

Leila laughed with him, but under her laughter there was an angry throb of malice. "I'll score off Marcia for that," she thought, and turned her quick mind to the nearest means at hand. Smiling still, she leaned against Harleth's shoulder. "Wouldn't it be great to go out in a car now, for half an hour's joy-ride?" she suggested, "I'm tired of dancing, and it's awfully hot and stuffy in here. Nobody would miss us, and we'd be back before people get ready to go. I'll slip upstairs and get a big cloak and tie a veil over my head, and you meet me at the side door. Let's take your roadster. It'll be heavenly to get out in the cool night air for a little while."

"All right," he readily agreed. "We can do it as easy as not, if you really want to. We'll just run up to the Crossroads and back. Will you hurry?"

It had been but a nebulous beginning of a plan with Leila, but it slowly grew and shaped itself as they slipped out in the middle of a dance and separated—she for her coat, he for the car. When she came downstairs again, very quietly, all muffled

in a great rose-coloured cape, soft with fur, she had thought a little further. She would keep Harleth out in the night as long as she could—she would try to keep him out until after the guests had all gone. It would be a stinging experience for Marcia, and it would not be so hard, she thought, to make Marcia believe that it was all Harleth's fault, for Leila was not past feeling a qualm of taste at being discovered as accomplice to anything quite so raw. And it was not likely that any one save Marcia (whom she wished to know it) and Belle, for whose opinion she cared not a rap, would ever know that she and Harleth had committed this suggestive indiscretion. The other guests would not, she thought, connect his absence with hers. But if they did—well—she must chance that. The main thing was to punish Marcia as cruelly as she could.

The little roadster, guided by a sulky and astonished Wasson, slid quietly up to the side door as she came out. She looked about her, and a spark of fire—the tip of a cigarette—shining in the darkness, indicated Harleth's presence. Now he came forward and helped her in as Wasson got out. He settled himself beside her and they rolled slowly past the lines of parked machines, down the drive, and out into the street. At a better pace they ran through the town with its wide streets and big houses sleeping comfortably behind neat hedges.

At last they were in the open country, headed straight for the setting moon, a half disc of orange light, low in the west. And now they began to speed.

Leila drew herself down in the car so that the wind of their wild pace would not strike her with its full force, pulled her cape's soft warmth about her, then closed her eyes and gave herself to the enjoyment of motion—motion that seemed powerful enough to go through any obstacle; motion that seemed effortless, without volition, without limit of time or space.

She leaned forward and put her lips to Harleth's ear. "Don't stop at the Crossroads," she said, "I want to go on and on forever."

He nodded—the speed fever had laid hold of him—and they went on faster and faster and faster until the roadsides were a blur of dark shadow and the moon before them danced a wavering, jerking sara-band against the dim horizon.

The cold rushing air slowly, but very surely, steadied and soothed Harleth's excited nerves and sobered him. Gradually, as his head cleared, he was able to think with some sort of coherence. The humorous aspects of the situation vanished with startling abruptness, and he began to wonder why he had ever been such a fool as to come out in the night on this silly ride when he ought to be at home doing the decent thing among his guests. When

this thought fully got through to him, he slowed the car, ungently.

"What's the matter?" asked Leila, without stirring.
"No gas?"

"Oh, there's gas enough—I hope," said Harleth, "but we've come a lot farther than I intended, and we've got to get back as fast as we can. Good Lord!" (he had pulled out his watch and fumblingly struck a match to see it by); "it's almost two o'clock. What time did we leave, anyway?"

"I don't know," said Leila (she did know; it had been just one o'clock); "I don't care, either—it's been so glorious. Let's go on a little bit," she coaxed, "I don't want to go back yet."

But Harleth was turning the car and trying to keep out of the ditch. "It doesn't make a great deal of difference what you want, my dear," he replied. "We're going to go back, and go back as fast as we can. I'll look an awful fool if I'm not there when people begin to leave, you know. Too much champagne cup and too much *you* have gone to my head to-night, but this air has sobered me up. Now sit tight—I'm going to hit the high places."

It was almost at this same moment that the Hart family was deciding to go home.

CHAPTER V

I'M TOO old for this all-night junketing," Mr. Hart Senior had said, coming up to his hostess.

He was pretending to complain, but his eyes twinkled reassuringly. "I can stand it until two o'clock and then I go to sleep in my chair. But we've had a wonderful evening. If my wife and daughter weren't standing here eyeing me so suspiciously, I'd tell you that you've achieved something that most hostesses don't—you've been the belle of your own party."

"Oh, don't mind me, William," said Mrs. Hart, beaming on Marcia. "Make all the pretty speeches you want, to Marcia; they're all true. I'm glad I've reached such years of discretion that I needn't worry who's the belle of the party any more. But where is Harleth? I want to say good-night to him, too." Marcia looked up at her, unable to speak, and there was an instant of blank embarrassment. Then Mrs. Hart went on easily: "Tell him good-night for me, won't you, dear? I know he'll be here in a minute, but I'm so disgracefully sleepy" (she pretended to stifle a yawn) "that I simply can't

wait. Come, William—come, children.” And the Harts were gone.

Marcia put out a suppliant hand to Curt Jennings who was hovering near. “Curt,” she said, “will you see if you can find Harleth? I’ve missed him for—for—this last fifteen minutes or so. I’ve spoken to the servants and none of them knows where he is. I—I don’t know quite what to do next. He must be sick—or—or—” She hesitated—stopped.

“I’ll find him,” said Curt. “Don’t worry another second. Go on dancing. People aren’t beginning to leave yet—the Harts are always the first, you know.”

He hurried to the butler’s pantry. Sako, weary but indefatigably serving relays of refreshments, was there and looked up with his polite set smile.

“Send me Mrs. Crossey’s maid as quickly as you can,” said Curt.

Sako disappeared and was back in the shortest of spaces with Imogen following him. Curt motioned her a little aside.

“Do you know where Miss Templeton is?” he asked, warily.

Imogen was instantly transformed from a respectful servant to a flaming goddess of righteous indignation. “Ho, yes, that I do,” she returned, biting the words, “I ’ad it from Wasson in the servants’ sitting room straight away it ’appened. ’Er

and Mr. Crossey's gone out for a joy-ride in the little car—the cat!"

"Here, none of that," commanded Curt. "When did they go?"

"H'over an hour ago, sir, and it's a shime, it is. But that's the way with the men. Oh, I 'ates the sex!" she finished, in true Christabellian scorn.

"You keep a more respectful tongue in your head," said Curt, "and don't speak like that about your employer, or you'll lose your place."

"Yes, sir, thank you, sir," returned Imogen, dropping a curtsey. "But I cawn't 'elp my feelings."

"You can help your speakings," said Curtis. "That'll do. You may go. Wait a moment; is Wasson in the servants' sitting room now?"

"No, sir—'e's in the garris."

Curt turned to the house telephone and called the garage. "Wasson, this is Mr. Jennings speaking for Mrs. Crossey. What time did Mr. Crossey go out in the roadster?"

"A few minutes after one, sir."

"Did he say when he'd be back, or where he was going?"

"He didn't say anything, sir," replied Wasson; then, hesitatingly: "The fact is, Mr. Jennings, Mr. Crossey wasn't quite himself, sir. I felt kinda worried, seeing him go out that way."

Curt banged up the telephone with a fervent

"Damn!" Here was a nice little mess. And what was he going to report to Marcia? After a moment's reflection he decided to tell her the truth—with a few expurgations. He hurried back and "cut in" determinedly on her partner.

"I've found out all about it," he said, whirling her away. "He and Leila went out for a little spin in the roadster. They only meant to go a few miles—some foolish notion of Leila's about getting a breath of air, I believe—and evidently they've had a puncture or run out of gas, or something like that. It seems a frightful wild-goose chase to send to look for them, for there's no telling what road they took, and anyway Wasson'll have to be in the garage until everyone's gone; but if they're not back by that time he and I will both go."

He regarded the effect of this story anxiously. Marcia took it gamely.

"I see," she said. "That's it, of course. Thank you, Curt. I think—I think I'll tell the people he's ill; if they ask." She stood, wrinkling her forehead, forgetting that she must not even look worried.

"Of course," said Curt, eagerly; "tell 'em indigestion. And I'll watch to see when he comes back. Don't say anything unless you have to, Marcia. Most of 'em won't ask; people are always in such a hurry to get home when they start, you know."

In his heart he was saying with fervour: "The

damned drunken cad—the damned drunken cad,” and finding in the silent reiteration of the phrase a certain emotional relief.

Marcia had comprehended the situation a great deal more exactly than Curt had described it. It had been impossible for her not to know that Leila and Harleth had been together practically all the evening, and she had known to the second when they slipped away. But she had expected them momentarily to return, and that they had not come put the last touch of strain to a night that had been joyless and disappointing. The thing had been bad enough, of itself, to endure, but it suggested a number of painful questions. Had he been seeing her in town very often? the devils of suspicion asked; and in all the history of his small flirtations had there ever been anything so careless, so unmindful of the proprieties, as this? Didn’t it *mean* something—something ugly, something threatening? She did not dare to try to think it out. She could only try, with all her strength, to dance and smile and talk as though she were not numb with portentous fears.

Even though Harleth and Leila had not returned, it was with inexpressible relief that she saw her guests beginning to go. As easily and as carelessly as she could she told her lie to the few who asked for Harleth and to those who didn’t ask for him, she didn’t name him. Some of them, she felt sure, had guessed what

had happened and she writhed under their imagined pity. She vowed to herself that after this one night she would put things on a new basis with Harleth. He *must* be a responsible and self-controlled being; he *must* stop indulging his whims at her expense; he *must* take less to drink; he *must*— Her catalogue stopped. To try to make Harleth over would be to lose him irrevocably. How many times before had she gone down this same blind alley? And yet; how could she endure—and how could he, how *could* he, have done—this? There was the riddle, for which, in herself, she could find no answer.

The very last guests were bundling out under the porte-cochère when the little roadster came speeding up the drive. Curt Jennings saw it first and went in quickly to Marcia.

"They're back," he said; "all safe and sound. So everything's all right and I'll run along home. Good-night, Belle. Good-night, Marcia"; he stopped before her, his good-natured face drawn and anxious. "I say, Marcia," he added, haltingly, "if you should need me—for anything at all, you know—just telephone." And then he took himself off with considerate swiftness.

"I'm going straight to bed," said Marcia, stonily, to Belle, "aren't you dead tired?" And it was to find them halfway up the stairs that the two runaways entered.

Harleth was black with chagrin. This was much more of a mess than he had reckoned for, to come home and find the guests departed and the servants putting out the lights. Knowing what an offence he had committed and what a humiliating hour Marcia must have had on account of it, he felt the usual hateful rage against the person he had made to suffer most. It is always so; the people we have injured without cause are the ones we are perpetually angered against. He called out, loudly:

"Oh, I say, don't leave us, you two. We must have a little supper after our ride—and I want another drink."

Marcia turned, her face ghostly pale against the dark wall but her voice was even and pleasant:

"We're too tired, Harleth—I think we'll go on up."

"So will I," said Leila, coming forward. "I'm frightfully tired, too."

"Well, I shan't," said Harleth, defiantly. "Sako, what have you got left?" He turned into the dining room and they could hear him talking to Sako and Sako's murmurings in response.

The three women went on up the stairs to their separate rooms. They did not try to talk to each other. They did not even say good-night. Even Leila's complacence wasn't strong enough to make her pretend that nothing had happened. Belle was

so furious for Marcia's sake that she could not speak to Leila, and she knew that if she said anything to Marcia herself she would burst into tears. Marcia, spent as she was, tingled anew with fierce resentment. Once in the shelter of her room she pressed her lips together and clenched her hands to keep from tears while she submitted to the ministrations of Imogen. She wondered mechanically what she ought to do. How could she reach him? How could she make him see——?

In the dining room things were not going very well. Harleth was highly displeased with the fragmentary cold meats set before him and announced his intention of making something in the chafing dish. That Sako should seem weary from working all night was only a further aggravation, so he sent the little Jap downstairs for more champagne and was very fussy about how it should be iced. When he had food and drink to his liking, he was more out of temper than ever. The wine did him no 'sort of good, for though the ride had dulled the effect of what he had taken at dinner and throughout the evening, it had no more than dulled it, and this new drink and the warmth of the flower-scented room brought him quickly into a state of muzziness and unsteadiness. Presently his anger melted. He became repentant—very repentant. He told himself that he would go upstairs and beg Marcia's pardon

and tell her just how it all happened. He resolved that he would never make such a blithering fool of himself again. It was all quite clear to him what he intended to do, but when he got up to walk, he was surprised that his legs did not seem to understand his intentions. He found himself going toward the sideboard instead of the door. But by dint of holding to pieces of furniture and leaning against the wall and careful manœuvring of his feet, he at last gained the stair rail. His progress upward was full of halts and odd shakinesses and uncertainties, and he did not understand why. But he gained Marcia's room at last. After fumbling a bit he managed to get hold of the knob and open the door.

"Marz-zia," he began—and strangely enough there was that same odd hesitation in his speech that he felt in his knees—"Marz-zia, I'm—I'm—s-sorry——"

His words of repentance and apology came to a sudden end for he tripped and fell, sprawling and clutching, over the end of the chaise-longue.

Marcia Crossey flew to shut the door behind him, even in that moment of panic thankful that Imogen had gone. There was only one thing to do, and that thing she did. Silently she pulled him to his wobbling, unsteady feet and steered him across the floor to the door that opened into his own room. He was still somewhat dazed from his fall and did not protest.



Strange! It would not open!

Then, suddenly, he felt sleepy—very, very sleepy.
He slipped down on the floor beside the door and
went peacefully to sleep.

But the sobs went on.

CHAPTER VI

WHEN Leila Templeton opened her eyes on the morning after the party, she yawned and stretched herself among the pillows like a kitten in the sunshine. She put out one lazy hand to turn the clock on the bedside stand so that she might better see its face; and then, struck with the beauty and grace of the gesture and the lovely colour of her skin, held her arm at full length and gazed at it appreciatively and a trifle critically. Forgetting the clock, she looked at her hands, both hands, with curious intentness. But no, there was not the slightest sign of age—no ridges on the nails, no tiny criss-cross wrinkles between the knuckles. They might have been the hands of a child.

Well that was something to her advantage. She pushed another pillow under her head and stared about the room, sulkily. Marcia had given her the largest and most luxurious of her guest rooms and Leila did not miss the smallest detail of it: the artfully arranged mirrors, the dressing table, the desk with its shaded light, the day-bed—everything, even to the piece of fine Italian cut-work and filet

on the night tray, and the convent-made monograms on the bed linen. She observed that the window curtains were hand-blocked, hand-woven linens, not ordinary chintz. Everything was disgracefully expensive, she reflected. And that string of pearls Marcia had worn last night! What outrageously good luck Marcia had had, anyway. And what outrageously bad luck she, Leila, had had. She had never dreamed, in the old days, when she had rather patronizingly asked Marcia to her home and had willingly helped on her marriage to Harleth Crossey that Harleth was going to make good so soon and so amply, and be able to set up an establishment like this. She felt she had been tricked.

For an instant she frowned, and then hastily smoothed out the frown with a delicate finger. Leila was twenty-seven—three years older than Marcia. She had intended to marry—oh, marry brilliantly—a multi-multi, or a titled and wealthy foreigner, or a diplomat—someone very much in the world's eyes and very well supplied with the world's goods. She wouldn't have looked twice at Harleth Crossey in her débutante days. But somehow the big match never appeared, and then her father lost every cent except a beggarly little ten thousand or so a year, during the panic, and since that catastrophe her world had been topsy-turvy indeed.

They had taken an apartment on the West Side, had given up their cars, and it was quite out of the question for Leila to keep her personal maid. After the years of living in the big five-story house, just off the Park, in the East Seventies, the apartment was cramped and crowded, and living was made hard and disagreeable by an unaccustomed proximity. Misfortune did not draw the Templetons nearer together in spirit or affection, even though it did in the flesh. Mr. and Mrs. Templeton were frankly selfish and resented the change in their fortunes as much as Leila did. From the first moment they took the attitude that life had been unfair, and they pitied themselves overwhelmingly in a querulous, plaintive way. Their other daughter, Daphne, had married very well before her father lost his money, and lived in a big, prosperous up-State city, and Mrs. Templeton soon found it convenient to spend most of her time there where she could have the ease of her old life.

This left the apartment to Leila and her father, and Mr. Templeton fell into the habit of spending his days at his broker's and his evenings at his club. Leila would not go to her sister save for the shortest possible stays, though now and then she asked—no, demanded—money of Daphne to supplement her meagre allowance. It was unbearable to see Daphne enjoying ease and tranquillity—her future assured.

Leila was feverishly anxious not to drop out of things in New York and she went about far more eagerly than she had ever done before. In fact, she rather overdid it, and her anxiety to get desirable invitations and be seen everywhere told heavily against her. She had never been a great favourite with the women of her set and they were not disposed to do her any favours now. The men she could always draw after her, but that availed her little, for eligible bachelors were few and far between—and very much on guard. It was hard to interest them seriously in a woman of Leila's age and lack of fortune, so palpably eager to marry, when débutante heiresses were coming out every year.

She received all this, with a clear, bitter understanding as she lay there in Marcia Crossey's luxurious bed, and was conscious that it was luxurious out of all proportion to what she considered Marcia Crossey's deserts. The great new house had both impressed and piqued her ever since its completion, and its gala array of last night had roused her to an active irritation. There had been something of that pique expressed in her attempt to try her powers on Harleth Crossey, combined with the desire to revenge herself on Marcia for wishing to slight her. She knew that it was a false move to make an antagonist of Marcia—that she needed to have the Crossey home open to her, that there was a

distinct advantage in being on terms of intimacy with this wealthy suburban circle—but this very need of being politic fanned the smouldering flames of her resentment. For the thousandth time she reflected that if her father had not been such a fool as to lose his money, she would never have found herself in such hateful circumstances.

But there was no use going on with that train of thought—it led nowhere. She must work with the materials at hand and control herself for her own ends. Later—when she had achieved them—She smiled a smile of pleasing anticipation.

She sat up in bed suddenly and shook back her sleek, dark hair. Across the room she caught her reflection in a cunningly placed cheval. She addressed the mirrored Leila.

“After all,” she said, “it was his own silly doing. I’m not Harleth Crossey’s guardian. He shouldn’t have taken so much to drink, and—and—” (she eyed her image appreciatively) “I don’t see that he was so much to blame, at that. I looked awfully well last night.”

Yet even this reassuring thought did not lessen the awkwardness of the approaching moment when she must see Marcia and Harleth again. It wasn’t going to be easy. She drew down her eyelids reflectively and rang for a maid, told her to draw her bath and put a handful of verveine crystals in it,

and asked that she might have her breakfast upstairs.

"Please tell Mrs. Crossey," she added with a weary little gesture that was pure dramatics, "that I've a headache and will just stay quietly in my room and rest until I feel better. She's not to bother about me at all."

This message was presently brought to Marcia, who received it without comment as she sat at a belated breakfast with her other guest. Harleth had not yet appeared and Marcia had not asked for him nor sent to him. She had gone to the door between her room and his, which she had locked against him the night before, and had put her hand on the key, intending to open it and see whether he was sleeping, or sick, or—what his drinking of the night before might have done to him; but her hand fell away of its own accord. She could not open that door and look at him. She could not find it in her heart to care acutely whether he was sick or not. She did not acknowledge it, but she would not have been too sorry to know that he *was* sick.

So she had left the door locked and gone downstairs to direct the servants in the final clearing out of the decorations of the night before and in putting back the rugs and furniture and all the small ornamental paraphernalia—lamps and vases and cushions and the like. The rooms were in order again, even to

fresh flowers, when Belle appeared, yawning grievously, and the two friends went into the sunny breakfast room together.

"Why didn't you have a tray sent up to your room?" asked Marcia, solicitously. "You don't look half-asleep."

"And you don't look as if you'd half slept," Belle wanted to reply, seeing Marcia's pallor and reddened eyes. But aloud she spoke cheerfully: "How can you ask such a question? Don't you know that breakfast in bed is one of the many desirable things that is forbidden to ladies of my weight? But I am sleepy; I admit it. Perhaps my coffee will wake me up. No cream, please. And no sugar. Gone forever are the halcyon days when I might have three lumps."

She went on talking determinedly: what Jay Hooker had said about Tiny's muscle; Ursula Raymond's dress, which was certainly of the vintage of nineteen-ten; what an old dear Mrs. Hart Senior was; and how funny Timmy and Jack Appleton were—anything she could think of that would fill up the silence and distract Marcia's mind. In the midst of her chatter the maid came in with Leila's message.

"Very thoughtful," commented Belle. "One of the most opportune headaches I have every known. Perhaps it will keep her in her room all day."

"Oh, Belle," said Marcia, wearily, leaning her

head on her hand, "if I only knew what I ought to do. There's no use pretending. You saw . . . last night. I've always known that Leila was hard and selfish and a man-eater, as Curt Jennings called her, but we've always been friends, in a way, and I'd never have expected that she—— Why, she was brought up to a code of good manners—a sort of essential decency of behaviour to other people, I suppose it might be called—and now it's as if she deliberately overstepped it, as if she didn't care. It's so foolish of her. She can't gain anything by it, really. She doesn't make me jealous in the usual way people are jealous. She's put me through a horrible experience and she's made me so angry that I can hardly bear to think of her. And why—why? I wonder whether I ought not to send someone to pack her things and order a car to take her to the station?"

"You'd be perfectly justified in doing exactly that," said Belle. "But if I were you I'd wait an hour or so. I rather think she'll go of her own accord. Leila's clever enough, you know. She must realize that she's made it impossible for her to stay here over Sunday."

There was not a word from either of them concerning Harleth's part in last night's escapade, though both were thinking of him. But neither would speak of him—~~Marie~~, because she revolted from

discussing him even with so close a friend as Belle; and Belle, because she wanted to say things about his behaviour that Marcia never could have borne, in spite of their truth. It was a moment for robust silence about Harleth.

It occurred to Belle, with this fact before her, that for herself and Marcia to stay in the house was intolerable. If they should go out, the scene would be changed, and there would be something new to make small talk about. So long as they stayed indoors Harleth and Leila were round their necks like millstones. Besides—if she and Marcia cleared out, it would give Leila a chance to leave without the slightest friction anywhere. She set down her coffee cup and looked out of the window.

"I'm feeling so stodgy," she said. "Why don't we go for a good brisk walk in the country? Do you feel up to it?"

Marcia, too, saw the way of escape opened and snatched at it.

"Oh, yes," she cried, "indeed I do. We'll go out along the woods road and see if we can find some pussy-willows, if you like. It's lovely out there, but pretty rough; we'll have to put on heavy shoes. Don't you want me to lend you a corduroy skirt and a little hat?" She jumped up from the table. "Let's go right away," she urged.

They lost no time in getting ready. In short

skirts, heavy shoes and sweaters, they swung out of the house and down the drive at the very moment when Leila, bathed and reclining in her ruffled négligé, was eating her breakfast in solitude and considering anew the complications into which she had drawn herself. It would be simply deadly to try to stay there over Sunday, with Marcia out of temper and Belle siding with her. She ate her rolls and her marmalade and her egg with excellent appetite, mentally occupied in trumping up an excuse to get back to town as soon as she could. She had settled herself where she could see herself fully in the cheval, for it was a habit of Leila's to sit, when alone, where she could face a mirror. She had found it an excellent way to perfect her many poses. And now she shrugged her shoulders toward her image.

"Yes, Marcia'll be stiff and touchy and Belle will take her cue from Marcia. Harleth'll probably be repentant, and that will be worst of all, for he'll blame me for everything. I think I'd better get back to town and let them straighten it out as best they can. My presence isn't exactly—helpful."

She smiled at the mirrored Leila and devoured the last bit of marmalade with pretty greediness.

Her resolution, being formed, she wasted very little time in carrying it out. When she learned that Belle and Marcia had gone to walk, the way was clear. Hearing of the proposed departure,

Imogen herself came to pack her bags, in order that she might have the satisfaction of packing them very badly—and of also carrying the report of her own eyes of what the unwelcome guest was up to. While Imogen was thus engaged, Leila sat down at the desk and wrote an affectionate little note to Marcia.

MARCIA DEAR:

I'm sorry to seem rude, but Father has just telephoned that he's not very well—he's been threatened with a cold for days—and he wants me to come home at once, so I'm rushing off without even waiting to see you or thank you for a lovely party. Please come and have tea with me the next time you're in town—I never have a chance to talk with you when Belle's here.

Love,

L. T.

She read over the finished note with a naughty twinkle in her eye and concluded that it would do very well. "Sounds simple and sweet and natural—I particularly like that touch about Belle," she thought. Then she hurried into her clothes, tied her smart little veil over her smart little hat, tipped Imogen none too generously, and made her way quickly downstairs to the waiting motor, reflecting with satisfaction that she would just catch the twelve-fifteen and that she had very neatly saved herself a most uncomfortable three days.

CHAPTER VII

IT WAS thus it came about that Harleth Crossey woke to a house cleared of everyone but servants.

He woke also to a feeling that his head was bound about with hoops of red-hot steel that tightened and loosened agonizingly with each breath. His tongue was furry and stiff. His eyeballs were apparently burning dry in their sockets and sharp pain stabbed his eyelids when he tried to raise them. And there was nausea. These unpleasant symptoms were aggravated by the fact that he had slept on the floor, in all of his disordered clothes—except his necktie, which he had dropped off when he had staggered from the bed where Marcia had placed him. The absence of this particular piece of attire had not, unfortunately, added to his comfort.

He slowly pulled himself up, though every movement increased the torture of his head, and sat down limp and miserable in a big chair. After a little he reached for the pitcher of water on his night stand, conveyed it shakily to his lips, and drank every drop of its contents. Presently he loosened his

collar and pulled off his coat and then let himself go limp in the chair.

"I'm a swine," he said, thickly. His sensations did not contradict him. He sat still, his aching head dropped on the chair back, trying to remember when he had ever drunk too much before. His memory obligingly referred him to his undergraduate days, when a crowd of them celebrated a football victory by sampling generously every liquor in a thoroughly stocked bar. Since that time he had never gone the limit, although he had made his cocktail as much a part of his dinner and luncheon as bread.

After a while he drank some more water, and looked at his watch, and after gingerly feeling of his head, decided that he might make an effort to shave and bathe. There were remedies for his condition in the bathroom cupboard, and the sight of them cheered him. He dosed himself on the principle that if one teaspoonful is good for one headache, three teaspoonsfuls will be efficacious for a head that aches in three places—front, back, and sides. After the pain in his head and eyes had somewhat subsided, and he was beginning to feel more normal, he permitted himself to think over the events of the night before. Some of them were not at all clear to him. He was aware, however, that he had made a fool of himself about Leila Templeton and that he

had been exceedingly rude to all of his guests by absenting himself for the last part of the night. What had they thought! What were they saying to-day! And Marcia! He winced. His eyebrows tilted up boyishly. "I'll catch it this time, heap plenty," he said to himself and grimaced into the shaving mirror. Wouldn't it, therefore, be a great deal better to duck out without a word, and go—no, not to the office. The office was unthinkable to-day. But there was the Country Club and he could play a round of golf—maybe two—for the air would help his head—and perhaps have dinner out there with some of the men, and come home late. "Let the girls fight it out among themselves," he concluded with a decidedly forced unconcern.

But first he would reconnoitre. He knocked and gently tried the door into Marcia's room, but found it locked. That was odd, he thought, but he remembered nothing about it, and decided that a maid must have sprung the catch without knowing it. He went over to the hall door and opened that. There was no one in sight, though he could hear Junior and Nurse conversing in their own special language in the nursery. So at last he ventured downstairs and it was Sako who discovered to him, so to speak, that he was alone.

"Missa Crossa and Missa Perca gone for walk," said Sako.

"But where's Miss Templeton?" asked Harleth, puzzled. "Not down yet?"

"Missa Templeton gone, too, but not for walk. Missa Templeton order big car and go for train. Leave note for Missa Crossa."

"That's odd," said Harleth. "Where's the note?"

Sako produced it and since it was unsealed Harleth did not hesitate to pull it out and read it. The easy impudence of it made him smile. "She's too clever by half, the little devil," he thought, admiringly. "And what a charmer she looked last night. No wonder I went off my head; no woman has a right to be so damned attractive. Why didn't Marcia check me up a bit right at the beginning, I wonder. She might have seen I was making an ass of myself." He began to feel indignant at Marcia for not taking better care of him as he folded the note and put it back into its envelope.

"Bring me some black coffee in the library," he said to Sako. "I don't want anything else."

He had thought he would drink it quickly and leave the house before Marcia and Belle could return. Even though Leila had simplified things somewhat by going, he was not specially anxious to meet Marcia's eyes so soon. But it was very comfortable there on the big Chesterfield before the fire, with his coffee on the table by his side. The sunshine outside was tempting, but his head still ached, and he felt un-

equal to any great physical effort. The links were soggy, he knew, and there were long stretches where the wind was always peculiarly cutting. While he was still debating whether to go at once or wait a little and take his ease, Belle and Marcia came in from their tramp, glowing and fresh, with all the annoyances of the night before apparently blown away and forgotten.

They were laughing and talking as they came in, but as they glimpsed Harleth in the library silence fell on them. Belle went on upstairs, but Marcia came in to him. The wind had whipped the colour back into her cheeks, and in her rough walking skirt and deep blue sweater she was particularly girlish and appealing. She entered with just a touch of uncertainty, and glanced about her with a question in her eyes.

"But where's Leila—not down yet?" she asked.

"Oh, Leila's flown—left a note for you. It's there on the table," said Harleth. He did not offer to get it for her, but she picked it up as she came over to him, and dropped down on the end of the sofa while she read it.

"She *has* gone," she said, raising her eyes to his at last. "She says she had a message from her father—that he's not very well, so she thought she'd better go to him at once. It was certainly—timely."

The last word was a challenge, but Harleth did not

choose to take it up. He looked at her pleadingly, but she was gazing into the fire, so he suddenly dropped forward and put his head in her lap like a repentant, shamed little boy.

"Marcia," he begged, "I'm so sorry—about last night. Why did you let me do it to you?"

It was droll and disarming; and besides, Leila was gone—miles away by this time. Marcia laid her hand on his thick, crisp hair and pulled it gently.

"Are you truly sorry? Or are you just sorry because you don't want me to scold you?"

"Both," he answered, and smiled up at her. But she did not smile in return.

"I don't see how you could," she said at last. "No, I don't see how you *could*, Harleth. In your own house. And making things so hard for me. And then—afterward—"

There was something in her voice that made him sit up suddenly.

"Afterward—what do you mean?"

"After you came back," she said, her voice hard to manage. "You drank some more and you got very—drunk. You could hardly walk upstairs and you—stumbled over something—and fell down and I—I had to help you up and lead you into your room. Harleth—"

Recollections came back to him in a vivid rush.

"Then it was *you* I heard crying last night," he said.
"And you—you locked your door."

"Yes," trying to be calm; "I locked my door."

A moment before he had been ready to admit that he had been a beast and a fool, and to beg for forgiveness with real disgust of himself and pity for her. But that moment had gone as swiftly as it had come, and harder emotions followed. He began to feel aggrieved and badly treated. After all, he hadn't done anything criminal. Yet here was Marcia looking at him tragically and acting as if he'd beaten her and stolen money from the baby's bank. He flung back his head.

"Well, I've said I'm sorry," he asserted, irritably, "and there's nothing more to say, so far as I can see. You don't want me to go around and apologize to everyone who was here, do you? Or get out an engraved card of regrets—with a mourning border? I made a rotten fool of myself, but there's no use rubbing it in. Why didn't you tactfully check me up when you saw how I was going? The trouble is with me, I'm a very imperfectly domesticated animal."

Marcia, in her turn, felt a healthy anger stirring.

"The trouble with you, Harleth," she returned with spirit, "is that you'll blame everybody but yourself for your own faults. What possible chance did I have to check you up—*tactfully*, I believe, was your word—when you once got drinking and making

yourself conspicuous with Leila? You knew perfectly well what you were doing—at first, anyway. But you'll do what you like and let everyone else suffer for it, and then you'll say you're sorry and pretend to think that squares it. ‘Imperfectly domesticated,’ indeed! You might just as well say you're a case of arrested development. Don't, for heaven's sake, take refuge in phrases. Oh, Harleth” (the anger dying out of her voice), “*what's* the matter? Why don't things go right with us any more? Maybe it *is* my fault. Can't we try—can't we both try not to have any more horrible, miserable fiascoes like last evening?”

“It was a fiasco, wasn't it?” he agreed, softening a little to her appeal. But that could not last, any more than did his first spasm of repentance. He set his chin obstinately and got up and went to the door. “I'm going out to the club for a round of golf,” he said, shortly. “The atmosphere's a trifle too tense here.”

Marcia sat still where he had left her, looking into the fire. In some subtle way he had put her in the wrong, though she had all the obvious right on her side. Perhaps she had, in some way, failed him, just as he had failed her. Perhaps she might have done something last night, instead of letting him go on. Yet, if she had interfered, and there had been a scene, that would have been worse than what act-

ually happened. But ought she to have risked it? Just now—if she hadn't been angry and flung out at him— Oh, it was so hard to know.

She was not a self-righteous, wounded wife, eager to retaliate for the slight she had suffered. She was a perplexed, unhappy woman, who, honestly loving a man, was trying to find the way to keep him from hurting himself and her, and spoiling forever their love for each other. She wanted just that—to keep his love for her, imperfect and disappointing as it might often be.

There were so many decisions that she could not make: How far was she responsible for Harleth's shortcomings; indeed, how far was any wife responsible for her husband's lapses? Where did his responsibility begin and what did it include? She couldn't just wash her hands of him and say that his mistakes must be on his own head. They would be, she knew, no matter how much she tried to shield him—and on hers also, and on everyone who loved him and was near to him. He was wilfully blind; he would not see, as she did, the dangers he had neared, and so long as she loved him (which would be always) she must, she *must* try to do much more than her fair share in their life together. If he wouldn't take care of their happiness, then she must take double care. If he wouldn't safeguard himself, then she must safeguard him. There

must be some way, even if she hadn't yet been able to find it. Was it, perhaps, her shrinking from doing things that might be uncomfortable and unpleasant—like last night, when she might have tried, as he said, to check him up—was that the part of her that was at fault? It is astounding how many ways a sensitive and conscientious woman can find to excuse the most obvious faults and failings of the man on whom she has set her affections, and how obstinately she will blame herself for traits of his that ought to have been spanked out of him when he was six.

In these various and most thorough heart-searchings Marcia Crossey did not dwell on the thought of Leila any more than to say to herself that Leila was no more to Harleth than a means to express his recklessness, and a handy partner for his escapade—but of no interest beyond that, assuredly. Underneath these assurances she was conscious of a fearful shadow of doubt. The shadow crept nearer and nearer, and at last flung the blackness directly over her. She addressed the flames:

“But if he's *that*, then—he simply isn't mine at all. I wouldn't—I wouldn't live under the same roof with him for a moment if—— Oh, *that*—couldn't be.”

CHAPTER VIII

THE Crosseys had made an enviable place for themselves in the smart suburban community of Wellsridge that they had joined two years before, just when they had decided to build a permanent home. They were young, good-looking, moneyed, well-mannered, conventional; they had various friends and acquaintances of long standing already in Wellsridge, among those who knew themselves to be (though they would not have had the poor taste to say so) the "best people." With all these assets, there was no reason why Harleth and Marcia should not be liked, and generally considered an acquisition to the neighbourhood. The building of their large, impressive house further added to their good impression. Even the old residents who prided themselves on being exclusive and never knowing any newcomers—the Dwights and the Reuben Joneses in particular had this obsession—had voted them "in." The Country Club, the Riding Club, and the quiet little Tennis Club which was the last word as to social acceptance, had all put the Crosseys on their membership lists. But, being compara-

tively late settlers, they were still much observed; and when Harleth chose to fly in the face of all local traditions of good manners—and in his own house!—naturally the resulting tid-bit of gossip was a precious one.

The consensus of opinion among the women was that Harleth's behaviour was "impossible," in which four syllables the depths of condemnation dwelt. The men, recalling without the least difficulty the appearance of Leila as she made her entrance, were not so sure that he did not have some method in his madness, or at least, a very fair reason for it. But the men and the women alike joined in saying that Marcia Crossey was "wonderful"—"a thoroughbred"—and so on and so on, in the same strain of compliment, though Ursula Raymond added frankly that if Henry had so misbehaved, she would have certainly made a scene and beaten him, then and there.

Also, Jay Hooker and the Appleton boys and Curt Jennings and one or two others said quietly that Crossey was a damned fool and needed to be brought to his senses, and they were all pretty cool to him thereafter at the Club, and on the "club car" which took the town's business men away in the morning and brought them home at night.

Curt Jennings had said least of all—and felt the most. It was to him hardly to be borne that Marcia

should have been subjected to such an experience and no one smart for it. He would have liked to thrash Harleth to a mush and make him crawl at Marcia's feet and beg an abject forgiveness. Of all this he was more than usually secretive, because he would not, for Marcia's sake, have any one suspect how deeply he felt about it, and thereby add further titillation to the nerves of the local gossips.

As for Marcia and Harleth themselves, after that first encounter they smoothed things over well enough while Belle was in the house. A round of golf and a stag dinner brought Harleth still further back toward normal, and an invitation for a couple of hastily assembled tables of bridge at the elder William Hart's got through the evening well enough for Belle and Marcia.

Saturday sent Harleth to town, and the two women, with Baby and Nurse, motored over to see Mother Crossey. The next day, being Sunday, there was church in the morning, while Harleth loafed with the Sunday papers. In the afternoon, motor-ing; and at tea-time the Raymonds and Tiny Morri-sion dropped in, Tiny and Ursula having agreed that they must "stand by Marcia," and having, more-over, the urge of natural curiosity. It was dis-appointing to find Harleth not at all the sinner that repenteth, but his usual debonair self, while Marcia looked neither white nor suffering. She welcomed

her guests gaily, made them stay to supper, and telephoned for Jason Hooker to join them. Nothing whatever was said about the party, but in this conspicuous silence, and in the sweet solicitude of old Mrs. Hart at the bridge table two nights before, Marcia was bitterly conscious of an undercurrent of real anxiety and distress for her.

It was after Belle had gone, and they had settled down to the light routine of suburban life at its easiest, that Marcia saw how much the breach between herself and Harleth had widened and deepened, and how that one foolish wild evening had set a signpost on a real change and deterioration in him which must have been going on before, but which she had not felt. It had always been that, after a fit of temper or recklessness, he was frankly sorry, and there was a prompt restoring of confidence and understanding between them. This time it wasn't so. Except for the few words he had said that first day in the library, he was silent about what he had done; and oddly careless and defiant, as if to show that he was determined to do as he pleased, no matter what he smashed doing it. He had a swaggering, don't-care manner—he had sometimes assumed it before, but never for so long a time—and now it was not so much an assumption as an assertion of a hidden self that had been struggling to get the upper hand of him, and had finally got it.

Marcia was rebuffed and antagonized at every turn. She did not dare risk another plain talk; it would have been setting a match to dynamite. She chose to disregard him, and put on a surface ease; inwardly she trembled with distress and fear. She was intensely aware of him and of his every change in mood and feeling, and she knew that the hold of her affection had been somehow loosed from him, and that he was drawing farther and farther away from her. More certainly she knew that, if she pursued him and cried out to him and tried to hold him, she would only fail.

How had it all come about, she continually asked herself, that he should have gone so far, unheeded? He had never before so boldly flirted with another woman to the open slight of his own wife, and he had never before made himself like a common street drunkard. This last was unspeakable outrage in her memory. It had been so shocking, so loathsome to see him waver, and fall; and that loose-lipped, clownish smile changed him so horribly from Pan to Silenus. She shuddered away from the thought of that smile. Yet it was something gained to know that this part of his disgrace, at least, was all her own; none of the guests in the house had seen him so.

No one can live in unacknowledged cross-currents of strong emotion without showing the stress of it. The look of experience deepened in Marcia Crossey's

eyes and something of her courage left them. It was a change that was promptly seen by Harleth's mother and—being a wise and kind old gentlewoman, and privileged by her love for Marcia—she spoke of it.

She had been driven over to the new house in her own car for a surprise visit which included luncheon, and until Baby went to his afternoon nap. Up till that time she had seemed to be thoroughly engrossed with him, but when he was settled in his crib, and Nurse's manner suggested that the presence of spectators of her sleeping cherub was displeasing, she turned her attention to Marcia.

"I wonder," she began, "if anything's the matter with you—or if you're not right well, my dear? Has Harleth been up to something? You must tell me if he has and let me scold him. You're not half strict enough with him, you know. I've felt—maybe I'm an old fool, but I have felt it—that things haven't been just right ever since the party. I wish I'd dragged Father Crossey out that night, as I threatened to do, and been here to see for myself what went on."

For a moment Marcia was tempted to throw herself into those motherly arms and give her confidence completely. But that wouldn't be fair. She had no right to tell tales of Harleth to his mother—her own motherhood forbade it. So she evaded with what skill she could manage in haste.

"I wish you *had* come, both of you, it would have

made everything just perfect. It was such a mild night; I don't believe it would have hurt either of you."

"I suppose not; but at our age, Father's and mine, we live in such dread of new ailments. We're spiritless old creatures, I know. But—isn't there something the matter, Marcia?—something you want to tell me?" persisted the older woman, with an affectionate pat on Marcia's shoulder.

"Do I look as if I'd something on my mind, Mother?" asked Marcia, laughing, "or on my conscience? I'm just tired, I suppose. I've been going about a lot too much; I'm glad Lent's begun." This seemed a rather inadequate answer, but a brilliant subterfuge came to her. "Why," she exclaimed, "I haven't shown you the beautiful string of pearls Harleth gave me. Oh, you'll be eaten up with envy; they're longer and larger than yours."

"I want to see them, even if I am going to be envious," declared Mrs. Crossey. "I do love pearls. Pearls and life-insurance are two things every married man ought to invest in."

She let her questionings slip away, and though she looked shrewdly at Marcia, she asked nothing more. There are more ways of getting information than one, reflected the sage old woman, and there was something clear and splendid about Marcia's refusal to cry for sympathy that she had to respect. She knew

Harleth's temperament and felt sure that he had been indulging in one of his characteristic bursts of self-will.

When she got home again and had settled herself in the bright mid-Victorian morning room where her husband comforted his rheumatism in a cushioned chair, while Sing-Lo, the pet Pekingese, sat in state on his own ottoman beside him, she told her misgivings.

"Something's amiss with Harleth and Marcia," she said, shaking her stately gray head, "but I can't tell what. Marcia wouldn't give me a hint. She's got spirit, that girl. Most young women nowadays are quick enough to complain of their husbands, usually without reason. But not Marcia. Yet I could see that she's worried and unhappy."

"It's probably only a petty misunderstanding," said her husband. "You know Harleth."

Harleth's mother bent her lips in a quizzical smile. "I may be a queer sort of mother to say it, but I tell you this, Ben, that if Marcia were my own daughter and Harleth my son-in-law, I'd tell her flat not to stand so much from him. I went as far as I dared on that line to-day. There's no two ways about it, Harleth's difficult. You never could control him, and I couldn't. And Marcia can't."

"Life will teach him what's what," said old Mr. Crossey, philosophically.

"You always say that," said his wife, "but I think it's high time for life to be about it. And what he learns is going to cost Marcia dear, I'm afraid."

"There, there, Ella; you can't live other people's lives for them, you know."

"I wish I could," she answered. "Oh, don't I wish I could. I tried to get Marcia to tell me, but she wouldn't. Just shut herself up tight and put me off by showing me the string of pearls Harleth had brought her the night of their party. And by the way she handled them I could tell how little they meant to her. Something's wrong when a women doesn't touch her husband's gifts lovingly—and pearls! Isn't it dreadful, Ben—isn't it dreadful? I'd gladly give the remnant of my life to make sure that Harleth and Marcia should be happy together the way you and I've been happy. And I can't do a thing."

"You're jumping to conclusions, Ella," protested the old man. "They've likely had a little tiff about something."

"Not with that look on Marcia's face and the way she touched those pearls," protested the mother. "Harleth's done something pretty bad this time and I just know it. And I'm going to find out what it is."

CHAPTER IX

THE suspicions of his mother concerning the difficulty between Harleth and his wife would have been in no wise allayed, and her store of information would have been appreciably increased had she been able to see him at the moment when she was voicing her opinion of him to his father. All this, even though what he was doing might appear harmless enough in itself. There is nothing exactly shameful, scandalous, or horrifying about the sight of a man and a woman having tea together in a highly conventional smart restaurant. There is no reason why the man should not laugh applaudingly at what his companion is saying, though it may not be a particularly scintillating piece of wit. In this instance, Harleth Crossey found it sufficiently amusing to hear Leila say that she must search the tray of French pastry for a piece of humble pie for him.

The beginning of Lent had bored Leila excessively. It cut off her invitations, and she could not affect an interest in the round of charitable work which was the chief diversion of the season. Even the fashionable sewing classes palled on her. Her most usable

friends were away, Hot Springs and Aiken having called them. She needed something to do and she needed someone to play with who could afford to pay all the expense of her amusements. The name of Harleth Crossey came to her as she reviewed such possibilities, and she decided that enough time had intervened since her escapade with him for him to have forgotten (if he had been sober enough to remember at all) that she was in any way to blame for it. Perhaps Marcia had reduced him to repentance, and made him promise that, of Leila Templeton, never again! This reflection lent spice to her quick determination to reconnoitre. Even if Marcia had made threats and extracted promises—even then—well . . . it would be easy to find out. Harleth would do, until better material presented itself, to kill an hour's boredom, provided he was available. And she still held a smarting grudge against Marcia. To the telephone, therefore.

"Is this you, Harleth? This is Leila Templeton. Tell me, is Marcia still angry with me—— It was all your fault, you know—— Oh, nonsense, don't try to blame it on me—— And were you scolded dreadfully? I'd love to hear about it—— Yes, really—— Tea? Oh, I have an engagement; but I'll break it—— Oh, no, don't let's go there, we'll run into everyone we know. A quieter place—— Yes, that will be perfect—— At five—— Yes. Good-bye."

It had been even easier than she had expected. He had been very responsive over the telephone. She reflected blithely, while dressing, that she had always rather liked Harleth Crossey, but that now he was ever so much more fun than he used to be. And he was making so much money. Decidedly, he might be very useful—

Leila was not unaware of that ever-increasing class of women in New York—every city in the world has them as well—who have found their purses not long enough to compete with wealthier intimates, and who have therefore devoted their talents to the sophisticated art of extracting checks and gifts of jewellery, furs and motors, from their men friends. Frequently these welcome gifts are payment for the advancement of the man's social ambitions, if the men themselves are comparative strangers to the life of the city. And sometimes these women, through old friends or relatives, procure introductions for their generous benefactors to other men high in finance or business circles.

Then there is the other class of women who, with very little income, still are seen everywhere, well dressed, with enviable jewels, maintaining a pretense of extreme respectability in an atmosphere of unpleasant whispers. It was clear that they had paid for their luxury in other ways than by acting as social sponsors or business go-betweens.

Since she had been poor, Leila Templeton had

thought a great deal of these two sorts of women and just what could be got by either method. She knew that she could not endure to go on living in "this horribly grubby way." She did not intend to do so. But —she was cool-headed. She saw that the women whose lives she was considering fooled no one. Everyone knew how they managed their dressmakers' bills and paid for their sables. Leila knew that she did not possess the special brand of scheming, pushing energy that would make her a woman of the first type. And she had not the slightest intention of becoming one of the second type—unless every other way of escape was shut. She wanted everything, without paying either her convenience or her good name for it. There is only one graft left on such conditions for a woman like Leila Templeton: Marriage. Therefore, though she had intended, ever since her schoolroom days, to marry and marry well, now she was husband-hunting in deadly earnest.

She had calculated with care the chances of marriage in her own circle; there was no one save one puffy widower who was just about ripe to be consoled, but Leila felt that, unless driven to extremes, she could not attempt the rôle of *consolatrice*. She even doubted, gazing on the puffy one, whether her histrionic powers were great enough to make her sweet sympathy convincing.

There had been a possibility, of course, in Curt

Jennings. He belonged to a well-to-do, well-connected group of young men who left the universities the year that Marcia, Belle, Leila, and a dozen more girls of the same set were released from fashionable finishing-schools. Leila had known him, but had never considered him matrimonially until her fortunes had turned. Then it was too late; he had made that quite plain only recently. It was exasperating. She only hoped that he realized that she never would have looked at him if her family had not lost all their money.

There was no use in wasting time on Curt Jennings, and the widower was a last chance. Unless something new and worth while loomed suddenly on her horizon, there was but one other line left for her to take—she put it to herself quite plainly and without the slightest hesitation: Some other woman's husband. With divorce so easy and everyone more or less doing it, no odium attached to it. It only meant longer delay. But there— She shrugged her shoulders. She had borne so much trouble that a little more—and to get *well* established so that even Daphne might be eclipsed—was not worth worrying about. She would have preferred, naturally, a superlatively attractive, wealthy bachelor, but since one of this sort wasn't to be had and beggars must not be choosers, she must take whatever desirable came most quickly to hand.

With thoughts like these uppermost in her alert, well-set-on head, she started to meet Harleth Crossey for tea in a mood of excited anticipation. And the meeting started off auspiciously by his laughing at her search for humble pie among the pastry for him.

"But I imagine you had enough of it at home, didn't you?" she asked. "Of course you know you deserved it."

She challenged him, mocked him, drew him; all of which was grateful flattery to him.

"I eat nothing I dislike, at home or anywhere," he declared, "and if I deserve punishment for admiring you, I'm afraid I'm in for a frightful lot of it."

"I hope you are. I like to be admired, you know. Who is that man staring at us from the other side of the room?—the one with the little moustache. Look, he's speaking to the waiter now."

Harleth bent forward, pretending to grumble.

"What a waste of time to make me look at a man when I might be looking at you. Oh, that's Otis Vail—he's vice-president of a bank down town. It isn't any use for you to ask me if he's married or not. I shan't tell you and I shan't introduce him to you. He's not the sort for you to know."

"You're very thoughtful, Harleth, for all of your nonsense," said Leila, appreciatively. "Some of the men I know would have made it plain that they don't think it worth while to protect me against—any-

thing; not even themselves. You remember Lily Bart, in that novel of Mrs. Wharton's? She isn't a bit overdrawn—what she had to meet after she was poor, I mean. I could tell you——” (She closed her lips and waved away the unpleasant subject.) “But tell me, has Wellsridge revived and recovered from the shock you gave it?”

“My dear girl,” pronounced Harleth, loftily, “do you suppose I pay the slightest attention to what people say—or think, or do—in a gossipy little suburban town like that?”

Leila made her eyes round and ingenuous.

“No”—and her voice rang touchingly sincere and earnest—“No, you're probably the one person in the world who could say a thing like that and it would be true. But honestly, Harleth, it wasn't sensible of us. I suppose Marcia will never forgive me; but—sometimes—there are moments when a woman just turns crazy reckless, and nothing matters at all, except—the person she's with.”

But that was too thick even for Harleth's masculine vanity.

“Oh, come, Leila,” he said, grinning in spite of himself, “don't waste your full powers on me. You're a very dangerous ornament to have about any home, and I suppose Marcia knows it. I'm sure I do. I shouldn't be surprised if you do yourself. But as for Marcia's never forgiving you—

that's nonsense, of course. Marcia's all right, only a thought too old-fashioned in her ideas, and too domestic. I told her the other day that the trouble with me was that I'm only imperfectly domesticated."

Leila took her rebuff very prettily. "That's a wonderful description of you, Harleth," she said, laughing. "I'd never thought of you in just those words, but that's it, exactly. You're *very* imperfectly domesticated. That's why you're so much fun."

"Am I fun?"

"Heaps!"

"I'll tell you a secret," he said, leaning toward her confidentially. "So are you."

"That's because I appreciate your imperfect domestication."

Harleth sighed with exaggerated misery. "It's women like you who are the cause of imperfect domestication—not only mine, but many other unhappy men."

"Are you unhappy?" said Leila, quickly.

"I'm perfectly happy," he returned, still on the light note. "Every man in this room is envying me, and every woman is wondering where you get your hats and frocks."

"I wish I could tell them," said Leila. "Maybe if I sent her a lot of new customers Madame Dufault wouldn't dun me so pitilessly. I tell you, Harleth,

all this talk about the pleasures of poverty and the simple life is wicked imagination. We know nothing about it until we actually experience it. I never could have *dreamed* that it was so hard to be poor. I shall be driven to earning my own living; but there isn't a thing I could do except teach dancing, and I don't suppose I could earn enough at that to pay for the slippers I'd wear out. And to have to live in that cramped, miserable apartment after our lovely big house! It isn't easy, Harleth. Besides, heaps of people I used to know and think were my dearest friends, have found it convenient to forget all about me. I'm never sure when I go anywhere that I'll not meet with some frightful snub that will send me home absolutely heartsick. We've given up our cars and our opera subscriptions, and everything that makes life worth living. I'm so depressed with it all, that—— You don't mind my telling you all this, do you? I don't usually catalogue my troubles, you know."

Her tone and her look were all genuineness. It was hard for a girl like Leila, Harleth admitted, a girl who had been brought up to everything, suddenly to have it all snatched away from her, and be snubbed and slighted and deprived of the setting and accessories her youth and beauty deserved. And he knew old Templeton for a selfish old pig. And he knew Mrs. Templeton, too—whining, tiresome, hypo-

chondriac. He was very, very sorry for Leila, and since he had been very sorry for himself of late he found her spirit gratefully akin to his own. He spoke without further reflection.

"Look here, Leila, I'm feeling pretty dull myself this evening. Can't we go somewhere and have a quiet dinner together? And perhaps a drive first? Unless you have something else to do."

Leila waited before she answered. One of the things she knew best was that to be too accessible definitely weakens a woman's charm.

"Oh, how I'd love to—but I can't to-night," she said, with candid regret. "You know Father's feeling wretched, and he counts on having me with him for dinner. It's so little that I can do for him, poor old dear, and I must do that. But you'll ask me again, won't you? Soon?" She looked up at him, and from under the heavy fringe of her lashes her eyes were inscrutably alluring. They gave Harleth Crossey a slightly dizzy sensation. He put his hand over hers, covertly, behind the tall teapot.

"Very soon," he said, eagerly.

CHAPTER X

TEA with Harleth had been—interesting. That was Leila's word for it as she went her way home in that purry mood so many women feel when they know they have excited a man's admiration against his better judgment. Being comfortable in her vanity and well pleased with herself, it was unfortunate that she saw fit to scold the negro hall-boy.

He was a West Indian, sulky and revengeful, and he had been head hall-boy in that one apartment house for so long that he felt as if he owned it. He distributed mail when it suited his lordly convenience and he was not over-particular about delivering telephone messages or cards, except to those of the tenants whom he happened to like. He did not fancy the Templeton family, principally because they so plainly found life in the St. Quentin a sad come-down in the world. Herbert, as head hall-boy, had a very exalted idea of the St. Quentin. He resented any criticism of it. He also resented any criticism of himself, for he considered himself as one with the St. Quentin.

To-day, when Leila entered, he carelessly produced three cards and a telephone message and handed them to her, saying without an air of apology that they had come "some time this week" and that he "s'posed he had forgot 'em."

Leila was accustomed to be imperious with servants, and after a moment of silent rage she rated Herbert in good round terms, ending with the assurance that she would certainly report him to the superintendent. Herbert listened to her in defiant sullenness and banged the elevator door behind her.

"I seen these year high-flyers befo'," he told the other boy on duty in the hall; "an if she repo'ts me to the sup'ntender I'll sho' git even wid her. Ma'k me, man!"

"I don' see's they're s'much," said the other boy, sympathetically. "Lotsa folks in the St. Quentin spen's mo'n what they do. An' they ain' got no car."

"Well, if she thinks she's goin' to repo't *me*, 'n git away wid it," persisted Herbert, with childish spite, "she better think twice. I be'n fo'teem yeahs wo'k in New Yo'k 'par'ment houses, an' what I don' know 'bout gitten even wid tenums what gits too fresh ain' wu'th knowin'. Dat's me."

If Leila, safely within her own apartment, could have heard Herbert's treasonable mutterings, she would probably have laughed and forgotten them at once. She was thinking of more pleasureable

things. She was glad that she had had the prescience to call up Harleth, and she felt that his responsiveness was due partly, at least, to her own cleverness. It was plain that he was bored at home and ready for distraction. She did not look very far ahead—she was not ready yet to do that—but she was sure that he would not wait longer than twenty-four hours to call her up and ask her when he could take her to dinner. Her vanity and her self-esteem, which had suffered sharply since the fall of the family fortunes, were soothed by the impression she had made. She liked the way he had looked at her, and the way he had talked. He wasn't going to be too easy—and she liked that. She had liked the touch of his hand on hers. It was intimate—but yet not too intimate.

Harleth had felt that, too. He had gone away from their meeting wondering why she was so alluring, so fascinating to play with. He had not liked her at all in the years before he had married, but now she stimulated and exhilarated him. She wasn't too exacting—she liked him just for himself and as himself, and didn't hint that any improvements might be desirable. In this estimate there was bound to be an unconscious criticism of Marcia, who couldn't accept his faults of temperament—and he admitted nobly to himself that he had faults of temperament—just as little harmless vagaries, but must want to

root them out—an uncomfortable process. Leila, now—Leila could make allowances for a man.

Poor Leila; he was sorry for her! He remembered what she had said about her present deprivations—and, by Jove! she hadn't been complaining, either. It was a darned shame that a girl as good-looking and as jolly as Leila hadn't married long before this, to have someone to look out for her. Girls were brought up in a rotten way—trained for nothing but to dress well and dance and talk—and then, if anything happened, as had happened to old Templeton, why, it was all up with them; they were as helpless as babies.

He went home so full of these musings that he was moved to repeat them to Marcia, as they sat at a belated dinner—his prolongation of the tea hour having made him miss his usual train. He might just as well have put up a large sign: "I have been talking with Leila Templeton" so far as Marcia was concerned, for she guessed it at the first word of his generalities. And as it chanced, she was in the first achy, unpleasant stages of a severe cold in the head, and was correspondingly depressed and miserable. She listened to Harleth's pathetic word picture of a girl of wealth suddenly obliged to meet the exigencies of poverty, with rising indignation, but in silence. The name of Leila Templeton had not been mentioned by either of them since the day after the party,

but now it fairly sang in Marcia's ears as an under-current to what Harleth was saying. It seemed a final touch of callousness added to what had gone before. And there was her cold. No one with a cold in the head is sweet-tempered or long-suffering. Such a physical state absolutely forbids those virtues. So, when Harleth elaborated his theme, Marcia's thread of patience snapped.

"You don't need to feel so sorry for Leila," she said. "The Templetons really have quite a lot of money if they'd only try to make the best of it and not whine. They're not starving nor in rags, and the St. Quentin is not a hovel."

It was a fair catch and Harleth could only look silly. He flushed, and tried to carry off his confusion with a forced facetiousness.

"What makes you think I was talking about Leila, Mrs. Sherlock?" he asked.

"Because," said Marcia, feeling achier and more miserable every second, "that's the sort of thing she tells everyone, and has done, ever since her father failed."

There was a finality about her tone that caused dinner to proceed silently thereafter. But later, when they were established in the library, Harleth with the evening papers and Marcia with a book and three handkerchiefs, he harked back to the matter somewhat irritably.

"You're perfectly merciless on Leila. You've not forgiven her one bit for the night of the party. And I was really the one to blame. Trust a woman for always coming down hard on another woman, even though she's an old friend."

"You weren't all to blame, nor was she," argued Marcia, slowly. "And why is it so strange for me not to forgive her? Friendship—in the past—has nothing to do with it. If she wanted to be really my friend, she wouldn't have asked you to go off in the car—that night."

"It was a crazy thing to do," said Harleth. "But you know perfectly well I had no idea things would turn out as they did. It was all very unfortunate, but there was no real harm in it, Marcia."

He was trying to be dignified—and fair. He hoped that Marcia would see things in the same broad, open-minded way that he did. But if Marcia saw things that way she gave no evidence of it. She did not even answer him. So after a moment or two, when he waited for her to speak and she did not, he cleared his throat and went on. But now he was more genuine.

"You're not jealous, Marcia, surely?"

Marcia flung down her book and faced the issue squarely. It was a huge relief to be able to speak out.

"I don't know whether I'm jealous or not, as people usually talk of jealousy. It almost kills me

when I see you doing things that aren't right for you to do, and that make it appear as if you cared nothing at all about even—good manners to me. Would you like it if I danced all evening with Curt Jennings, or one of the Appleton boys, and ran away in a motor and left *you* to say good-night to our guests—all of them, every one—and all of them looking about for me, and afraid to ask because they knew something was queer about my absence? Would you have been jealous if I'd done that? Leila's just like liquor with you—you don't need her, but you can't make up your mind to let her alone, because she's dangerous and makes you do reckless things. Can't you, just for a little, look at it from my side? Why—you're my *husband!* I love you with every breath I draw! I want you to think and feel for me as I think and feel for you. And I can't, I can't understand why you don't. I can't see why you want to do things that hurt and humiliate me and spoil—everything. It's just as if you threw mud over the lovely things in our house—our beautiful golden house."

She stopped with a sobbing breath. The logic of her appeal had meant nothing to Harleth, but the affection and the dependence on him had. His irritation slipped away from him, and he laughed an exultant, triumphing little laugh.

"Why, Marcia girl, how foolish you are! How

can you say such things and make yourself miserable in such a ridiculous way? You know I'm awfully sorry about the night of the party, but what can I do? You've seemed so angry with me ever since—and—and—" (he looked at her doubtfully) "I'm not half what you think I am, Marcia. You want me to be too much. You're always thinking of an ideal husband and not about me—that's what's the trouble. Come over here and sit on my chair and let me hold you, you poor little sick thing. Oh, Lord!—somebody's calling."

Perhaps if the Dwights had not chosen that particular evening to call and talk about the action of the Greens Committee in arranging the new bunker just beyond the sixth hole, Marcia and Harleth Crossey might have talked out their difficulties fully then and there and arrived at some possible compromise between Marcia's ideals and Harleth's shortcomings. But the Dwights did call, and the conciliatory moment passed, and when the Dwights had gone it was impossible to recover it.

Marcia had begun to think of her outburst as ill-timed and violent, and to hark back to her grievance that he had once more been seeing Leila. And Harleth had begun to hark back to his own grievance of not being treated in what he was pleased to call a fair, broad-minded way. And besides, he hated comparisons, and thought that women ought not to argue

—or scold without reason. He could not admit that there was any reason.

In short, the attempt at an understanding was only a further misunderstanding. Yet, subtly, Harleth felt warned. He made up his mind that he would see less of Leila. Of course, he would have to take her out to dinner this once—he had asked her to go and she had said that she would, and said it with an eagerness that proved to Harleth Crossey's mind that she anticipated it as a bright spot in her dull, meagre existence. This being what he wanted to believe, he had no difficulty in believing it, for he had the normal power of self-deception. It was easy enough to see, he thought, that Leila was counting on him as a friend, a real friend, or why should she have talked to him with such appealing confidences? Therefore it was his duty, as a friend, not to be too abrupt in letting her friendship go. Things of that sort should be done by delicate degrees. Of course, the fact that he *was* going to stop seeing her squared his account with Marcia.

He thought of all these things going into town on the train the next morning. He felt that he was a model husband—albeit misunderstood in some ways—and a wise, experienced man of the world. When he reached his office the first thing he did was to pick up the telephone and call up Leila.

It was exactly what she had expected he would

do and she was ready with a hesitating but subduedly happy voice to say that since her father was so much better to-day she thought she might safely promise to go out to dinner. With this accomplished, Harleth had his secretary telephone to Marcia that he was obliged to stay in town for dinner and went about his day's work feeling more like a model husband and experienced man of the world than ever. This would be the last time he would see Leila—yes, the very last.

He meant it. But he might just as well have saved all the time he had spent in planning it.

CHAPTER XI

APRIL, May, June, July, August—five months had run their cycle—and it was in the first week of September that Curt Jennings sat disconsolately in the drawing room of the Percy residence and waited for Belle to appear. It was a big room, with all its furnishings swathed in dull-striped holland, until they were no more than hideous caricatures of comfortable chairs and tables and sofas. Even the curtains and draperies were encased in long bags of the grayish-brown stuff that towered to the ceiling like gaunt spinster ghosts. Mrs. Percy, Belle's mother, had come of Puritan stock and her inherited principle of making ugliness a virtue was fully typified by the appearance of her house in summer. She would never have consented to flowered chintz.

From this dreary spot one could gaze into the back drawing room, also extensively behollanded, but a trifle cheerier because its long windows were open and green ivy had been trained on a lattice square before them. When the desert of dingy gray-brown became unendurable, Curt got up and

strolled back to this ivy and enjoyed its greenness and the fact that it was not cut up and bound with tape and made to cover something else. He was standing before it when Belle came running downstairs and found him.

"You managed to catch me very cleverly," she said. "I was going back to the Pier this afternoon, but when I got your note I planned to stay over. I only came to see the dentist, anyway."

"Narragansett any fun this summer?" asked Curt, perfunctorily, as they sat down.

"Oh, about as usual. But what's the matter, Curt? You said—Marcia——"

Curt plunged into the middle of his story.

"Yes, it's Marcia. She's getting thinner by the minute, and she looks so ill and wretched and miserable that everyone's speaking of it. All the same, she holds her head up and goes on just as if nothing were happening. I don't know what to do, but I thought you, being such a friend of hers— Maybe you can think of something. She needs someone with her, I think; an understanding, sympathetic woman."

Belle shook her head.

"No," she said, "she'd rather be by herself. I know Marcia. I went to see her as much as I could before we left for the summer, and I begged her to come and stay with us for August, and bring the

baby, of course, but she wouldn't. And I've written to her. But I couldn't say and do *too* much—there's nothing quite so hateful as being pitied, you know. But is it still going on so violently—Harleth and Leila, I mean?"

"They're together everywhere," said Curt. "You can't go to a roof-garden or a restaurant or a show without seeing them. He's not at home at all, practically. Jay Hooker says he goes out on the last train—the one-thirty—five nights a week at least."

Belle sighed.

"I saw them just before we went away, having luncheon together. She was wearing a huge bunch of those new roses, you know, the yellow ones that everyone's been talking about, the kind that Homen-dorff advertises as 'more costly and more rare than an orchid'; they cost five dollars a bud, I believe. Harleth's a fool—he's worse than a fool; and yet, there's a sort of appealing boyishness about him—you can't help liking him, no matter what he does."

"I can," said Curt, grimly.

"Oh, so can I; but you know what I mean. You feel as if this were just a sort of temporary aberration, and that underneath it all he's really sane and will come to, after a while."

"But *Marcia*," persisted Curt, bringing the conversation back to the subject where his interests

lay. "What's Marcia to do? She isn't going to sit down quietly and endure this sort of thing, is she? Is she going to put up with a 'temporary-aberration' excuse and let Harleth Crossey treat her like this and get away with it? And when his temporary aberration is all over and he gets good and tired of Leila, he's to come strolling home again at his convenience and find Marcia waiting there for him with open arms, is he? A fine life for a woman of Marcia's type, isn't it!"

"Of course I don't know," said Belle, "for Marcia hasn't told me anything, as I said. But I'm perfectly sure that if she thinks this is only a passing whim, one of Harleth's flighty spells, she'll endure it and wait for it to get over. She has done so before, I know. But once let her think that it's something more than that—well, she'll settle things very quickly. Marcia's got plenty of pride, but she's got sense, too."

"Which do you think it is with Harleth, a passing whim or the other thing?"

"I don't know; I don't know what I think about it. I'll say this, though: I've seen Harleth Crossey play the fool more than once before this, but it was always clear that he was *playing*. This Leila affair looks really serious to me. It's lasted so long, and—oh, you know just how Leila would do it, Curt. She'd flatter him and amuse him; and in an exotic,

noticeable way, she's always attractive to look at—you must concede that whether you like her or not—and Harleth likes to be seen about with a woman everybody stares at. And then—well—Harleth's selfish, and self-willed, and loves excitement, and always wants to be stimulated and exhilarated. And Leila's *exactly the same*; but mark my words, she's harder and cleverer than Harleth. She'll get him by playing on his weaknesses, and at the same time she'll indulge her own. Only, she'll be fully aware of every move of the game—and he won't. Oh, me! I wish to heaven Marcia had never married him."

"Amen to that. D'you believe his father and mother know about what's going on?"

"If they do, I'll back them to stand by Marcia. They're awfully fond of her."

"She'll need them," said Curt, regarding the ivy with troubled creases in his forehead.

"I suppose she will," agreed Belle; "that is, if she makes up her mind to *do* anything. I wish I could be of more help to her, but as I said, I thought she was better off alone without any one sitting by and forcing her to keep up a show of not seeing. She sees, Curt; she knows! The whole thing started with that party they gave when Harleth drank so much and Leila wore that indecent dress, and they made themselves so conspicuous together."

"It goes further back than that," declared Curt.

"I was there one Sunday while Marcia's Aunt Janey was still there. Leila had come out for the week-end and she and Harleth were amusing each other—finely. But—knowing them both—I didn't attach any particular significance to it at the time. I was only sorry for Marcia, that she had to endure it before spectators. But, Lord! that seems nothing to what she's being put through now. If only there were something that would really reach her—get her out of it."

Belle looked at him curiously.

"You're a good friend, Curt," she said; but there was something in her tone that caused Curt Jennings to take his leave shortly after. He did not intend that Belle should suspect his feelings for Marcia, and he was afraid that he might already have said too much. He consoled himself by thinking that everyone knew his reputation as a commonplace, staid bachelor. Moreover, Belle was a sensible woman, and so close and true a friend of Marcia that it was impossible that she would start a hue-and-cry of gossip and so add one more intolerable thing to Marcia's life.

But Curt swore under his breath when he came out on the scorching street.

"If I could only get a little caution into my thick head," he growled at himself, "I might be some help to Marcia. There wasn't any sense in going to Belle, I suppose—I almost wish I'd gone to see old

Mrs. Crossey instead. And why the hell can't I do something besides just paddle about and talk over Marcia with people who know her? That's the cursed part of it. Why can't I do something?"

But under that inexorable convention that binds even the most sympathetic of friends to keep out of domestic wrangles, there seemed to be no answer to his question.

CHAPTER XII

IT IS very doubtful whether Marcia would have noticed it at all, or even found it hard, had gossip attacked her with the convenient weapon of Curt Jennings's tenderness for her. She was so wrapped in a haze of despair about Harleth that nothing else could seem real. All else in the world moved around her as unsubstantially as a flickering cinema. Belle had been right in conjecturing that Marcia preferred to be alone, and she had further been right in saying that Marcia saw, and knew all that was passing.

Marcia loved her husband so well and so absorbingly that she had made herself unconsciously sensitive to every shade and gradation of his feeling. She could feel the faltering of his will in the hands of the other woman. She could feel him receding from her, and then—when some little touch of remorse was on him—come toward her again. But he never came so near that she dared try to hold him, as she had always before held him; or compel him to her as she had done in former escapades. She knew that he was well out of her grasp.

At times, as from the first, she blamed herself for failing him—for not being that which would have forced him to be his best self in spite of his worst self. Sometimes she had only anger for his shortcomings and contempt for his weakness, and acquitted herself from any responsibility for either of them. These moods would be succeeded by acute and burning jealousy—for that at last had come to her—a desire to keep him hers at all cost. Yet she knew she could not do that. If he no longer loved her, she knew that she must let him go. To try to patch up some sort of makeshift life with him when he was straining away from her would be far more unbearable than a decisive break of the tie between them. But her mind refused to go so far—she could not steady herself to face a real parting.

It was an age-long summer to her. By tacit agreement she and Harleth kept out of each other's way as much as possible; it was easier for both of them. Marcia cultivated a new habit of taking breakfast in her room, leaving Harleth to eat alone and go without seeing her. He rarely came home to dinner. Their invitations Marcia refused without consulting him, and she went out less than ever by herself, instinctively drawing away from her friends and their kindnesses, which bruised more painfully than blows. Sometimes a week would go by with barely a glimpse of each other, and when they did

meet Harleth was uneasily polite—a little furtive, very talkative about non-essential matters.

It was the affair between Imogen and Wasson that filled Marcia's cup of humiliation. She was in her own room trying to read herself sleepy and spare herself weary hours of lying wide awake in the darkness, when someone knocked frantically at her door and then opened it before she could ask who was there. It was Imogen, her pertness gone, her face green-white, her mouth gaping in terror. She flung herself at Marcia's feet, clawing at her knees.

"Wasson's after me," she cried. "'E's crizy—'e'll kill me! 'E's got a gun!"

In the first impulse Marcia pulled herself away and hastily locked and bolted her doors, though she could hear no pursuit. Then she turned to Imogen.

"What's all this about?" she asked, sternly. "Get up, Imogen, and don't grovel down there on the floor."

"We was all daown in the servants' sitting room," related Imogen, still gasping, "and Wasson come in, looking set and strange-like, and 'e says to me 'e was tired of my foolin' and if I didn't marry 'im 'e was goin' to kill me. An' 'e out with a gun an' pointed it at me."

She fell again to shuddering and sobbing at the remembrance.

"What did the other servants do?" asked Marcia.

"They cut an' run, same as me. An' Wasson after me. I'll swear 'e's right out there in the 'all, this blessed minute. Could 'e shoot through the door, d'ye think, Mrs. Crossey?"

"I don't possibly know," said Marcia, thinking rapidly. If the other servants had run away, there was no help to be expected from them, and if Wasson was drunk or crazy or both, there was no telling what he might do. She crossed to the nursery, that opened from one side of her room, and explained in a word to Nurse what had happened, and told her to bring Baby and come into her, Marcia's, room. She locked the nursery door that led into the hall, and hurried over to Harleth's room on the other side, and locked and bolted his hall door. Then she came back to her own room, ordered Imogen to stop crying, and took up the telephone. She did not want to send for the local police, except as a last resort, for they were few in number and a by-word of stupidity and inefficiency. Her nearest neighbours she hardly knew. If only Harleth were here!

And then it flashed to her that he might even now be on his way and would walk unarmed and alone into Wasson's ambush. She did not know how desperate the chauffeur might be, or whether he had more than one gun. She found herself trembling as uncontrollably as Imogen had done. But she told

herself sternly that trembling wouldn't do. She must first of all safeguard Harleth.

She called up the station and told the agent to watch for Mr. Crossey on the twelve-twenty or the one-thirty trains and tell him to telephone his home before he left the station—that it was most important.

What next? Why, Curt Jennings, to be sure. With enormous relief her mind leaped to his unfailing resourcefulness. But Central reported, maddeningly: "Line out of order."

At that, Marcia's courage began to ooze away and panic crept upon her. What should she do, alone in the house, with two women, and Baby—who must be protected at all costs. Oh, if only Harleth were here! She must find him! She *must!* She seized the telephone again and asked for a clear line into the city. He was still in town, of course. She must try—everywhere—for him.

First his two clubs. He was not at either of them, and had not been, that evening. She left a message at each, and on a wild chance that he might be working late, she called his office. There was no answer. Then, one after another, she tried several restaurants where he was known by name and sight and therefore might be easily located. But he was not to be found.

Desperately she called the last place where she had any hope that he might be—a famous old restaurant,

quieter than the others, that had been a favourite with both of them. After what seemed an unending delay, the chief captain came to the telephone.

"Eugène—this is Mrs. Crossey, Mrs. Harleth Crossey," she explained rapidly. "Is Mr. Crossey there? If he is, bring him to the 'phone as quickly as you can, please. I must speak to him at once."

"Ah, Madame," came back the voice of the old Frenchman, "I am desolate to tell you that Monsieur Crossey have just gone from here—not twenty minute ago." (He did not add, as he might have done, that Monsieur Crossey had had much wine.) He went on: "I have see him myself, an' spoke wiz him as he go. He has wiz him your frien', Miss Templeton, who have so often lunch wiz you here. Can I perhaps do somesing for you, Madame?" For he felt the agitation in her voice.

"No—no, thank you, Eugène."

She hurriedly rang off. She saw her chance now, for Harleth would undoubtedly be taking Leila home. If she could make a quick connection, she might reach him just as they would arrive. She pulled the telephone to her again and called the St. Quentin.

Another long delay whipped her raw nerves, but at last she got an answer in a thick Ethiopian voice, with the clipped accent of the West Indies. She explained, rapidly, that she was Mrs. Crossey and

must speak to Mr. Crossey—that he was bringing Miss Templeton home. Had she come in yet?

Herbert's head was not thick, though his voice might be, and he saw that his hour had come to get more than even with Miss Templeton, the complaining high-flyer. He had not served fourteen years in New York apartments to know nothing of injured wives and possible divorces, and a little matter of perjury was nothing to him. He answered according to his experience.

"O-oh—you wan' *Miss Templeton!* I tell you, ma'am, I got mah orders not to ring up Miss Templeton's apahtment afteh she come in wid Mistah Crossey. No'm, s'much my place is wuth t' distuhb them."

The implication in his voice was unmistakable. He put the receiver down and chuckled. "I 'spect de detectives'll be erlong next," he said to himself, cheerfully. "Lawsy, won' dey give dat high-flyer one good skeer. I bet de lan'lord'll put all dem Templetons out after dat."

The last word was hardly out of his mouth when the entrance door opened and Leila Templeton and Harleth Crossey came in, said a quick good-bye in the hall, and Leila stepped alone into the elevator while Harleth lit a cigar and hurried out to the waiting taxi. Herbert bade them both a smiling 'good evening. He was quite satisfied with his night's work.

At the other end of the line, as she heard the negro's words and comprehended the meaning of his leering emphasis, Marcia Crossey turned suddenly faint. She managed to get the receiver back on the hook, only after half a minute's fumbling, for the whole room was swimming about her and her hands shook uncontrollably. Then it was true—it was true! All that she had feared to fear!

Imogen's shrill whisper brought her out of her qualm of deadly sickness. "Mrs. Crossey—Wasson's right outside! I can 'ear 'im! Oh—oh—'e'll be shootin' next."

Called back from her own tragedy to the melodrama at hand Marcia stared vacantly at the girl, hardly comprehending. Then, with sudden determination, she got up and unlocked the door into the nursery.

"Nurse," she said, "take Baby up, carefully, so as not to rouse him, and go in there. You, too, Imogen. Lock the door on the inside and if you hear any shots or any noise in here, open the windows and cry for help. Someone will be sure to hear you. *But don't come out!* I depend on you to take care of Baby."

She marshalled them inside, imperatively, but Nurse hesitated, trembling.

"Oh, Mrs. Crossey," she whispered, fearfully, "what are you going to do? That crazy brute out

there will think you're Imogen and maybe shoot you."

For answer Marcia pushed her inside the door, shut it, and listened to the bolt click into place. "It wouldn't matter now if he did," she thought, and went quickly across to the door, unlocked it, flung it wide, and snapped on all the lights in the hall outside.

CHAPTER XIII

MARCIA CROSSEY threw open the door as recklessly as Harleth himself might have done, and with a coolness and disregard of danger that were really not courage at all, but an instinct of desperation. At the moment she honestly felt that life was not worth living and if the frenzied creature outside had greeted her with a fusillade she would not have flinched.

She walked boldly out into the glare of all the hall lights. At first glance it was evident that Imogen's ears had played her false. There was no one there. But at the head of the stairs a dark body, twisted and sinister, lay in a sprawling heap. The head was turned away from her, but Marcia recognized the chauffeur's close, black hair.

"Wasson!" called Marcia, sharply.

But he did not move. She went toward him slowly, and as she came nearer she could see a dark, wet splotch staining the floor beside him.

"Good heavens! he's shot himself!" she thought, and drew back with an instinctive recoil. Then, mastering herself, she went closer. In one tightly

clenched hand he held a small glass bottle—the other hand was outflung, empty. Marcia peered fearfully at the dark stain on the floor; but it was not blood. She dropped on her knees and touched gingerly that outstretched open hand. It was still warm, but it did not move at her touch. She leaned over and loosened the vial from his other hand, and as she lifted it, the sickish, unmistakable odour of laudanum rose to her nostrils. At the same moment she became aware of faltering steps approaching from the lower hall at the back, and then a trembling voice accosted her:

“Missa Crossa—Missa Crossa—you there?”

It was Sako, returning warily. Marcia stood up and let the vial fall.

“I’m here—I’m safe, Sako,” she said as calmly as she could. “Where are the other servants?”

“We are all here but that Imogen,” said Sako, advancing, a group of fluttered females behind him.

“Come upstairs,” commanded Marcia. “You and Cook and Martha must lift Wasson and carry him down to the servants’ sitting room and put him on the couch there. No—don’t be afraid. He’s not dead, but he’s taken poison and he’s in a stupor. I’m going to telephone to the doctor.”

With the news that Wasson was in a stupor the trembling band became bolder and prepared to carry out her directions. Marcia watched them start

downstairs with the inert body of the chauffeur and she flew back into her room to telephone. Dr. Hardman's office was only a block away and she called him; he would be there at once, he said. While she was waiting for him, she went in to Nurse and Imogen, told them what had happened, and repressed Imogen's immediate desire to have hysterics with the worst scolding she had ever administered to any human being. Then she sent the girl to bed, under orders not to speak to any of the other servants that night, on pain of instant dismissal, and, leaving the baby safe with Nurse, hurried downstairs. The doctor—a businesslike, curt young man—arrived just as she reached the lower hall. She told him briefly of Wasson's escapade while leading him to his patient. Dr. Hardman listened to her with admiration.

"You're perfectly fine, Mrs. Crossey," he exclaimed. "Most ladies would have sent for the police and then fainted away. Too bad Mr. Crossey happened to be out of town and let this all fall on you."

Marcia did not reply to this, but led him into the servants' sitting room, where Wasson had been placed on the couch. Sako and the others stood about, plainly revelling in the excitement, now that their scare was past. The doctor looked them over appraisingly.

"You stay—and you," he said, picking out Sako

and Cook, who was middle-aged and stolid. "The rest of you clear out. You'd better go, too, Mrs. Crossey. This will be all the help I'll need. I think—I think I can bring him around all right."

Marcia compressed her lips. "I'll stay and help," she said. "I feel responsible, you know."

The doctor gave her a quick glance and did not protest. He turned his attention to Wasson, stripping off his coat and shirt.

"He's farther gone than I thought," he said. "Quick!—I want wet towels and some strong hot coffee as soon as possible. You" (turning to Sako) "catch hold of his other arm. He's got to be roused out of this."

They sprang to obey him. It was a long, unpleasant fight, full of disgusting details that Marcia Crossey ever after hated to remember. Under her leadership Cook and Sako worked like mad, making coffee, holding basins, pulling and tugging at the drowsy Wasson to keep him out of what would inevitably have turned into the sleep of death.

At last they triumphed. A very feeble Wasson was piloted out to his quarters over the garage and put to bed by the doctor and Sako—weak and miserable, but alive and with every chance of staying alive indefinitely.

Marcia Crossey, ascending the stairs, worn and dishevelled, was suddenly conscious that the electric

lights were burning dim and that the windows had turned pale gray in spite of the illumination inside. It was the dawn—and Harleth had not come. In the stress of the last few hours she had not noted how fast the time was passing. She had expected him every minute of that time, with a stubborn, forlorn faith in him that the message from the St. Quentin had not entirely shaken. But the cold light of day, creeping on so inevitably, was stronger than her faith.

"He didn't even bother to try to hide it—he didn't even take the trouble to make some excuse for staying away," she thought.

Well, that held a certain honesty, at least. Better, perhaps, that he should do that than to have surrounded her with a maze of lies and pretense to cover up his—unfaithfulness. She hesitated over the word and then, in spite of her utter fatigue, her mind cleared and rose detached from her pain. Why not call him unfaithful?—except that it was a cheap and shoddy word, almost ridiculous from lurid fiction and shrieking heroines of the stage.

She went on, into her own room, flung herself down across the bed and lay there still, with her eyes closed. But her thoughts went on, straight and definite. It was, after all, they told her, not such a shocking thing, nor such an outrage to her that he should take the final step of unfaithfulness, since he was no longer hers in thought and inclination and affection. There

was no use agonizing over it—no use in pitying herself or making the situation any worse than it was by trying to “revenge herself” on him and on Leila. She must think it out. What would be best to do—for everyone—for Harleth most of all . . . For Harleth most of all.

Her breathing grew slower and her tense muscles relaxed. Sleep, stronger even than pain, came mercifully to her at last, and a little later Nurse and the repentant Imogen found her lying there in a slumber so deep that she did not so much as move an eyelash while they gently undressed her and put her properly to bed. Over their task they exchanged cautious whispers.

“‘E never come ‘ome at all!” contributed Imogen, with upraised brows and shoulders.

“There’s a sad change come to this family, I tell you,” the experienced and sympathetic nurse replied.

They both wagged their heads knowingly and bent pitying looks on Marcia. With a tragic forefinger, Imogen indicated the circles under her eyes, and her wasted wrists. They covered her gently, drew the curtains, and went out.

“I hope the pore lamb gets a good sleep,” said Nurse, lugubriously. “Well—let’s go downstairs and start the day a-goin’. I must get Master Harleth’s brekky for him and give’m his bath.”

“I ‘ope she leaves ‘im,” returned Imogen, her

mind still on her mistress. " 'E deserves it. She'd be 'appier like, once she made up 'er mind to it."

"It's little you know of marriage," said Nurse, tersely, "or you'd never unmake it so glib on the tongue. Marriage vows ain't on and off, off and on, like a fancy bracelet, Imogen; they're something you've got to stand to, whether you like it or not, sickness and health, you know, richer or poorer."

"They may mean that to 'er," argued Imogen, unimpressed, "but you cawn't never tell me they mean that to 'im."

'And, as usual, Imogen had the last word.

CHAPTER XIV

HARLETH CROSSEY had left the St. Quentin with a sense of danger escaped. He made no bones of it to himself that he was getting in deeper with Leila than was quite comfortable. Some day he was going to lose control of himself and there would be the devil to pay—which meant facing a large number of unpleasant eventualities. He had not intended to have this affair with Leila go so fast; but it had never occurred to him, up till now, to doubt that he had it well in hand, or to think that she was playing a great deal sharper, deeper game than he. To-night, for instance: He had not intended to stay in town without telephoning, but Leila had been so amusing—and so— Well, hang it, she had driven it out of his head—that was all there was to it.

And now it was too late; he couldn't ring up the house in the middle of the night. He had told the taxi driver to go direct to the station, but as they passed under a street lamp he pulled out his watch and held it into the light and saw that he had missed the last good train—the one-thirty—so there was nothing

for it but to wait an hour and take a hideous little accommodation at half-past two. A great deal better if he went to his club and slept there. He tapped sharply at the glass of the taxi and redirected the driver. But there it was again—too late to telephone.

Oh, Lord—what a hole he was in! He shrugged his shoulders defiantly. Let them think what they liked—he *wasn't* going to telephone, and he *was* going to stay in town. In all probability no one but the servants would notice his absence, since he and Marcia had been keeping so carefully out of each other's way. Yet he was annoyed and ruffled. Life seemed of late to have taken on a great many complications—but that he was responsible for them never entered his mind. He was still more annoyed when the telephone boy at the club told him that Mrs. Crossey had telephoned there trying to find him an hour or so before. His thoughts leaped to one unworthy conclusion.

"Spying on me—trying to find out where I am and who I'm with," he said to himself, angrily. "Marcia is so confoundedly old-fashioned; I suppose there'll be the very deuce to pay because I didn't let her know I *wasn't* coming home." And because there would be the very deuce to pay, he was further determined in not telephoning. It was absurd—unmodern! Even a married man was entitled not to

be followed and spied on. He made out his case on assumptions which were intended to put his conscience at ease, and did it so successfully that he went to bed feeling himself a righteous individual, much abused.

He woke in the morning with this feeling intensified by the coppery taste in his mouth that the liquor of the night before had left with him. In fact, he was so generously peevish toward the world at large—and his own world in particular—that he did not bother to call up his house even after he had arrived at his office. What was the use? Only give Marcia a chance to put him through a cross-examination, as if he were accountable to her for every moment of his time! He wasn't going scouting for trouble—not he! He supposed, of course, that he'd have to face the music when he got home that night—and that would be plenty soon enough.

His secretary, observing him, passed the word that the Chief had "one grand fine grouch." The secretary observed, also, that his Chief had an abnormal appetite for work that day. Work is, perhaps, the best sedative for a wakeful discontent with one's self.

It was mid-afternoon before Marcia Crossey woke from the sleep of fatigue which had come to her after her stressed and unhappy night. The summer

sun was thrusting long, inquisitive yellow fingers about the edges of the drawn curtains, and an adventurous spray of woodbine was tapping at the window-sill. That was the first thing that struck Marcia's waking eyes and her first thought was: "There—the woodbine did reach the second story after all, this year. I must tell Harleth, for he laughed at me when I said it would."

Then memory returned, with a throb of actual physical pain. She would never tell Harleth about the woodbine, or anything more that had to do with the little friendly details of their home and their life—not ever again. She put her hands up over her face and tried to think. She must do something decisive and do it quickly. But what could she do? Where could she go? There was Aunt Janey—or Mother Crossey—or Belle—

The door opened very gently and Imogen looked in.

"O-oh, Mrs. Crossey—I beg pardon for not knocking, me'm—I thought you might still be asleep. Will you want to get up now?"

"What time is it?" asked Marcia, dully.

"'Arf pawst three or quarter to four," answered Imogen. "Are you rested, me'm? I'm that sawrry," she went on, hesitatingly, "I'm that sawrry f'r making such a kick-up lawst night, me'm. But I was that fraughtened——"

"How is Wasson by this time?" asked Marcia.
"Has the doctor been here again?"

It appeared that the doctor had called again and pronounced Wasson much improved. He had given him some medicine and forbidden him to leave his bed until the next day. He had asked for Mrs. Crossey and when he had learned that she was sleeping, had said that she was not to be disturbed. And then Imogen, looking very shy and very eager, burst out with:

"An' I've been out to the garrige to see Wasson,
me'm, Cook an' me went, an'—an' I think as 'ow
I'll merry 'im before long, now. 'E looked so
w'ite an' sick, pore fella; it went to me 'eart, it did.
I 'adn't raightly felt 'ow desprit 'e was."

Her face shone with pity—a little cockney Undine who had found her soul through another's suffering.

"I'm glad," said Marcia. "It wasn't quite fair of you to drive Wasson into such a state, was it?"

"No, me'm," said Imogen, meekly. "Only I never once thought 'e'd be so silly as to think I meant it all. Tryin' to poison 'isself! Fawncy that, now."

Marcia tried to smile, as she slowly rose, but Imogen and her fancies seemed very remote. She must bathe and dress and, in the meantime, think—*think*. The necessity for some sort of a decision was pressing hard on her sick heart. She could not go on

—no, not another day—with things as they were. Already she had let herself drift too far. She must make up her mind to do *something* to take her out of her present torment, and bring her confused and chaotic life again into order and integrity. The rôle of a complacent, deceived wife was intolerable. She could not, would not, be that. Since Harleth had discarded the ties that bound them to each other, she, too, must discard them, but not in anger or in haste.

At last, from her mental travail, a decision was made. It was that, first of all, she would see Harleth. On what he said would rest her future action. Further than that she could not go.

After she was dressed she must find something to fill in the time before Harleth would come home, so, first of all, she smoothed the disorganized forces of her household again into order. Not that there was much to be done, for Cook and Nurse, disregarding Sako, had united in an effort to keep things running as usual. Cleaning had been done, orders given, and routine largely re-established, but all this had fearfully disturbed Sako's oriental calm and he had retired in gloomy anger to the silver closet and instituted a day of cleaning and polishing which was all unnecessary.

The household inspection over and Sako appeased, Marcia went to the nursery. It would be a blessed

comfort to hold Baby's rosy chubbiness against her and to hear his inarticulate babble of love as he put his arms around her neck. She sent Nurse downstairs and played with him a while. He had an engaging trick, if she kissed him on the cheek, of rubbing the kissed place very hard and saying, lovingly, "Wub it in." And then, for a joke, after many "wub it ins," he would suddenly cry, "Wub it off!" with his hands fluttering like little pink stars and his laughter ringing through the big nursery like the voice of a particularly gay and healthy cherub. Then he would run from her, the length of the room, as fast as his tottering feet could carry him, looking back anxiously to be sure that she was pursuing him, and when she caught him, he would hug her wildly and shout: "More—more—more," and set off again as fast as he could. Finally, tired out, he put his head against her and suggested "Take baby," with an insinuating sweetness. So she sat down and rocked him and sang to him, and he listened drowsily. Once he gave a little start as her arms tightened suddenly around him. "I'm going to keep you," Marcia was thinking, "no matter what else goes." But Nurse came in with his supper and Marcia reluctantly gave him up to enjoy his porridge and milk and toast. He dropped his spoon to wave to her as she went out.

CHAPTER XV

IT DID not make Harleth Crossey's mood any happier to find no car and no Wasson waiting for him when he stepped off his usual train. He waited, with growing impatience, for ten minutes and was just about to telephone when Dr. Hardman came by in his little runabout, and noted the fuming figure.

"I'll take you up to your house," said the doctor. "Your man's under orders not to stir out of bed until to-morrow, and I think he'd better not try to drive a car for another day anyway."

"For the Lord's sake, what's the matter with him?" asked Crossey, getting in beside the doctor.

"Oh, that's a fact—you've been out of town—I didn't think," said the doctor. "Why, Wasson ran amuck with a gun last night, and then got a despondent fit and tried to kill himself with laudanum shortly after midnight. Mrs. Crossey rang me up and we brought him round all right. Frightful mess, though. Mrs. Crossey was as calm and cool—never turned a hair—wonderful! By Jove! you don't see many women like her nowadays among the

idle rich." He cocked a humorous eye at Crossey. He had heard the rumours of domestic infelicity at the Crosseys and mentally dubbed Harleth a "queer sulky devil," as he sat there glowering. He determined to rub it in a little. "Mrs. Crossey locked the baby and the nurse in the nursery and went out to face Wasson, though she knew he had a gun and all the servants had taken to their heels. Bravest thing I ever heard of. She said she hadn't called the police because they're so stupid. And then, when she found that he'd taken poison, she had him carried downstairs——"

"Good God! did he get upstairs?" asked Harleth, appalled at the vista thus presented.

"In your upper hall," replied the doctor, pleased with the sensation he was making. "You'll see the laudanum stain on the floor at the head of the stairs. As I was saying, Mrs. Crossey ordered the other servants back, had the man carried downstairs, and then got me there without wasting a motion. Cool and plucky—kept her head every minute. Ah —here we are. I'll be in to-morrow for a final look-in at the patient. *Good evening.*"

Harleth Crossey entered his home with the sense of one entering a strange place. This was the sort of thing that went on, was it, when he was away—chauffeur running amuck, Marcia taking foolhardy risks, the whole neighbourhood talking, doubtless,

about what had happened and about his absence. Why had that ridiculous doctor pretended to think that he was off on a trip—half a dozen men in Wells-ridge knew that that wasn't true. The Reuben Joneses had been at the same restaurant for supper that he had gone to with Leila. A fine business, all this! How did it happen that everything conspired to put him in wrong! Well—he'd fire Wasson and Imogen, both of them, this very night, and tell Marcia to get servants who knew how to behave themselves. He came in like a thundercloud.

"Where's Mrs. Crossey?" he snapped at Sako.

"Upstair, I think, sir," said the Japanese.

Upstairs, accordingly, Harleth went and a moment later was bursting into Marcia's little sitting room. He made an effort at calmness, but it was futile.

"Well, Marcia," he began, "what is all this excitement, anyway? I came up with Dr. Hardman and he tells me you've had a regular five-reel movie here last night—guns, poison, servants running for their lives, all that sort of thing. I hope you've gotten rid of Imogen and Wasson both by this time."

"I hadn't thought of doing that," said Marcia, making a great effort at calmness also, and succeeding better than her husband. "Wasson is in bed and Imogen's highly repentant. Besides, they've patched up their affair and decided to get married. Absurd, I suppose, but the natural thing."

"Decidedly too absurd," said Harleth. "They've got to go, the two of them. Even if they get married it's no guarantee that this sort of thing won't happen again. I can't have my family running the risk of being shot up inadvertently in a servants' quarrel whenever I'm away——"

Marcia had risen to her feet.

"Why were you away?" she asked. The question brought him up short.

"Why—why——" he stammered, discomposed for a moment.

"I'll tell you," said Marcia, slowly. She could feel the blood dropping away from her heart with every word, but she must speak now and have it done. She rallied her courage and steadied herself with her hands on her desk. "I don't know where you were the first part of the evening, but I can guess what you were doing. You took Leila Templeton to dinner and then you went to the theatre and then you went on to Delmonico's for supper. That I know, for while Wasson was walking up and down in the hall outside my room, I was trying to reach you by telephone. I 'phoned to every place I could think of—to the clubs, to your office, to some of the hotels, and finally I got Eugène at Delmonico's and he said that you and Leila had just gone. Then I telephoned to the St. Quentin and the boy told me there—that—that you and she—had gone

to her apartment; and—and—he had orders—not to——”

She stopped and looked at him.

“Go on,” he said. “He had orders not to——”

“Not to—disturb you,” she finished, her voice trembling.

His face had gone as white as hers, and set itself in hard lines.

“Well,” he said at last, “do you believe it?”

“Harleth,” said Marcia, steadily now, “if you will tell me that it is not true—I’ll believe you.”

There was a silence between them in which you might have slowly counted twenty, but the eyes of neither of them wavered. Only Harleth Crossey’s face changed and glowed. Where he had been angry before, now he was in a madness of rage. Like a child who throws down his block castle to spite a playmate when it is really himself he injures, so Harleth Crossey tore down the fair edifice of his life and destroyed it without compassion. His faun’s eyes were the eyes of a fighting wild creature.

“Do you think,” he said, with deliberate provocation in every word, “do you think that I’m going to submit to being cross-examined and heckled and called to account for every minute of my time because I’ve been away from home for twenty-four hours? Do I have to give assurances as to the cor-

rectness of my behaviour? Does marriage mean that a man is not permitted to see or talk to another woman without his wife's putting the vilest sort of construction on it? Just because we are married I am not necessarily deprived of my personal liberty, am I?"

There was another tense silence.

"Not at all," said Marcia, slowly. "Nor does it mean that I'm deprived of mine. So I am going to use mine, just as you have chosen to use yours. I've thought it out and made up my mind. I'm not going to live with you any longer. I'm going to leave you."

"What!" blinked Harleth. His furious bombast dropped away from him. He was not prepared for this.

"Yes," said Marcia. "You've decided me. I want to be reasonable and I'm willing to be reasonable, but it's not reasonable or self-respecting to let a situation like this go on. For nearly five months you've done nothing but run after Leila Templeton. You've hardly been at home at all. You've been seen everywhere with her, you've given her presents—money, too, perhaps, though that I don't know—and you've made it impossible for me to think that you care anything for me. You haven't spared my feelings in any way. You haven't even tried to keep up any pretense of appearances. But I'm glad of that—

for it makes everything a lot quicker and easier. I've stood by and said and done nothing, for a good many reasons. The big reason is, of course, that I—care for you."

"Oh, Lord! Don't try to put a sentimental finish on your ravings!" he broke in, fiercely. "You say you care for me and yet you accuse me of things like this!"

"It isn't what I think of you that makes it odd," said Marcia. "It's the things you've done. Well, I won't insist that I love you. The thing that matters is that you have stopped loving me. I know it. I've known it for weeks. And it's because of that that I'm going to leave you. A marriage where there is neither love nor respect on either side is no marriage at all, and the sooner it's broken off, the better. If you had given me a straight out-and-out answer—Oh, Harleth—*Harleth*—tell me it isn't true; *tell me—*"

She waited, but he did not try to answer, only stood, angry and sullen.

"We've never told lies to each other, even little ones," she resumed. "If you'd only say it wasn't true—" Tears choked her voice, but she went on, stormily: "I'm a fool, I know, but I can't bear that, somehow. I try to think that it's no worse than all the rest of it—that it really doesn't signify; but—after all—you're my husband; and it hurt me hor-

ribly—horribly. Every bit of my body and soul protests against it."

She had put her hands on her bosom and pressed them into her flesh, but now she dropped them on the desk again.

"It all comes to this, Harleth," she continued more quietly. "I don't choose to be one corner of a triangle, with you and Leila for the other two corners. I've been trying to make up my mind to this for a month, when I saw how little chance there was for things to work out right. Last night has decided me—and that message from the St. Quentin. Even if you're not guilty, the mere fact that such a message about you should have been given by a servant, freely, without any suggestion, shows the relation between you two as it appears to people of that sort. What do you suppose it appears to people of more intelligence—to your friends—to mine?"

"I congratulate you upon your oratorical powers, my dear," Harleth broke in. "Now that you've catalogued my faults and failings, and depicted our happy domesticity so accurately, and fully convinced yourself of my unfaithfulness and general unworthiness—and generally bowled me out—just what do you propose to do?"

Through her tears and agitation Marcia could see that he was as racked as she, but that there was no softening, no belated compunction in it. And she

could bear to see and hear him no longer. She turned and ran past him, out of the door to her own room, crying out desperately—not knowing what she said:

“Oh, go away, Harleth—I can’t stand it. I *can’t!*”

'CHAPTER XVI

IT IS disheartening and astounding, too, when one thinks of it, the determination, the obstinacy, with which human beings persist in doing what they know is wrong and bad for them, and contrary to all the laws of propriety and common sense (which last are not always the same). "We have done those things which we ought not to have done"—indeed we have, prayerbook, not only once, but many times, and while all the world begged us to stay our action. There is an enormous, unacknowledged egoism in our mistakes. Other people may have to pay penalties, but we feel that we are exempt. It cannot be that Life is about to make us come an awful cropper, which will take years and tears and bitter endeavour to retrieve—and sometimes years and tears and bitter endeavour have no effect whatever. At thirty-five we ask how in the name of all that is obvious could we have made such double-distilled fools of ourselves at twenty-five. But at twenty-five—be truthful—we did not hesitate to defy, metaphorically speaking, the laws of equilibrium. We wanted to swing far out—and we did—but we had no notion



that we must as relentlessly swing as far back again. It was with just such boldness, such egoism that Harleth Crossey took his far swing into the realm of those things which we ought not to have done.

He had been treated to a scene; he hated scenes. He had been questioned; he resented questions. He had been called to account; he could never endure being called to account. Lastly, he had been asked—no, commanded—to reply to an accusation which, because it was not true, he would not even grant might very well *seem* true, all evidence being against him. He would not reply to *any* accusation—it was beneath his dignity. Therefore, he was a very much ill-used and badly treated man.

It is always awkward to remain in a house where an altercation of this kind has taken place, so he did not wait for dinner—he went straight back into town, and directly to the Templeton apartment.

“Something has happened to you,” exclaimed Leila, after one alarmed glance at him. “Why, Harleth—you’re ill! You look ghastly.”

The solicitude in her voice touched him—*she* at least cared for his welfare. Marcia had said nothing about his looking ill.

“I’ve been home,” he burst out, violently, “and I’ve come away. I don’t know that I’ll ever go back. Marcia—Marcia——”

He stopped. How was he going to tell Leila of

Marcia's suspicions?—and yet he must. He must protect Leila; that elevator boy—

"I know what you're going to say," said Leila, in a low voice. "You're going to say that Marcia doesn't want you to see me again. I suppose she's right, Harleth. It's been perfect madness, of course. But I—I'm not sorry."

This was pretty good work, even for Leila. And it was exceedingly effective, as she had meant it to be—a balm to the man's wounded *amour-propre*. He sat down beside her and took her hands in his.

"You'll have to be awfully brave," Leila. "I've got something painful to tell you; it's going to hurt you. Last night something happened out at the house—the chauffeur got drunk and threatened the other servants, or something like that—and Marcia locked herself up in her room and tried to find me by 'phone. She called up everywhere and finally Eugène—at Delmonico's, you know—told her that you and I had been there and had just left. Then she called up this house and the boy on the switchboard told her that you and I had come in and gone up to this apartment and that he had been ordered not to—to disturb us!"

Leila snatched away her hands and covered her face with them.

"Oh!" she cried. "Oh, how abominable! What a dreadful, horrible lie! I don't believe it, Harleth—

I don't believe it. *She made it up—to frighten you!*" This last was pure inspiration—instinctive, convincing.

"By God!" said Harleth Crossey, thoughtfully, "I wonder whether she did?"

"She must have," cried Leila, pursuing her advantage. "She must have! You must know that none of the boys would ever *dare* to say a thing like that of a tenant in the apartment. Why, I wonder you were taken in by it at all! It's the most transparent, outrageous thing I ever heard of! Oh, I can understand that she might be angry with me, Harleth—but that she should suggest anything like that——"

It was the one thing needed to put the final seal on his anger and resentment.

"Leila—I—I believe you're right. I—I don't see why I didn't think of it. As you say, it's absurd. And yet, it isn't like Marcia. I suppose—I suppose she hasn't been having exactly a good time out of all this."

Now it was Leila who flung out her hands and caught his.

"Have *we*?" she asked, with intensity. "Have *we* been having a good time out of all this, Harleth? When we knew that no matter how much we cared—it—it was all—no use—and wrong; and oh—for me—it's been—*torment!*"

This was plain speaking and it required an adequate



answer. But for the life of him, Harleth Crossey could not give it. He went back to the story of Marcia and the elevator boy.

"I can see, now," he declared, "what a clumsy fabrication it was. She said it only to draw me out—to make me deny it. I'm glad I didn't."

"You didn't deny it?" cried Leila, consternation succeeding pathos. "But Harleth—Harleth—what sort of a scandal shall we be involved in? Oh, now she'll think—What won't she think?"

"People have got to do more than think to make a real scandal," explained Harleth, somewhat acridly. "There's got to be positive proof."

A longish silence followed this information. It was broken at last by Leila.

"But what—what is Marcia going to do?"

She would have liked to ask a much plainer question, but she thought this was far enough to venture at the present moment.

"I don't know," muttered Harleth, frowning. "She talked a lot of wild stuff about leaving me and then she flew out of the room, crying."

Leila eyed him appraisingly. It was evident that she would not be able to get any accurate account of what had happened from him while he continued in this state of mind. She wished heartily that he would go. She had not had her dinner and she was hungry. Another unpleasant thought was

"I think I'll stay in town, at the Harvard Club, for a few days. You can find me there if you want me."

"And I think I shall stay at the St. Quentin for a few days," added Leila, playfully; "you can find me there if you want *me!*"

These simple sentences, as pronounced, held a meaning more ample than their mere words. She knew that he was telling her that the breach between him and Marcia was serious. And she was replying that she understood—and that she would wait.

CHAPTER XVII

IT WAS an integral part of Harleth Crossey's nature to take himself out of touch of anything disagreeable and to shift the necessity of action to the other person most concerned. Hence, the few days at the club. If he didn't bother about it, matters would inevitably adjust themselves. Marcia would see how unreasonable and foolish she was to try to deceive him about that message (he was thoroughly indignant about that—not only because she tried to deceive him, but because she temporarily succeeded) and she would do the sensible thing—make the situation possible in some way; he did not try to determine what or how. On one thing he was firm—that he was not going to give up an innocent and gratifying friendship because he happened to be married. He was sure that, in the end, Marcia would see that he could not be expected to do that. He refused to look at the facts in the case, save from his own particular angle of convenience and indulgence. He threw on her the burden of working out the situation, and he was determined not to be placated.

Marcia Crossey was more generous and more just. She had flung herself out of her little sitting room away from that talk with Harleth because she could not endure the pain of it. It reduced her to chaos of thought and paralysis of action, but it did not destroy her purpose. That she must leave him, and free him as soon as she could, she was determined—it was the only fair thing to do; but how was she to start about it? She must see lawyers, she must write Aunt Janey, she must make some arrangement about going—somewhere; yes, but where? The ugly practicality of the formalities of breaking up her married life and all its environment seemed the last touch of cruelty to be endured. She could not rally herself to it. The long months of distress that had preceded the final catastrophe had weakened and unnerved her. She felt helpless and deserted, shrinking from her ordeal and crushed under the weight of it. It was so that Curtis Jennings found her the day after Harleth had come home and gone.

He had been increasingly uneasy about her and, at the Country Club the night before, Timmy Appleton had remarked, as he came in, that he had just seen Crossey taking the train back to town, looking, (as Timmy profanely expressed it, there being only men present), "like active hell and damnation." Whereupon Jason Hooker had said with emphasis that he hoped Crossey would get exactly what he

looked like, as it was his (Hooker's) opinion that he was a rotter. Jennings had said nothing. Twice he had started to telephone that evening, thinking he would call up Marcia; and twice he had gone back, undecided. It was late and she was probably worn and agitated, he reasoned, if Harleth had been home in the mood Timmy had described. There was nothing to prevent his dropping in at tea time the next day, though. He took an earlier train from town to do it.

The atmosphere of the house, as he went in, seemed to him strangely still and unhappy. Sako, under his Japanese impassiveness, betrayed a distinct relief at seeing "Mista Jenning," but he came down with the message:

"Missa Crossa cannot see. Solly."

Curtis sent him back.

"Tell her it's very important. She must see me."

Presently Marcia came down—a white, stricken Marcia. The frail transparency of the hand she held out to him brought a queer sob into Curt Jennings's throat and for a moment he couldn't speak at all.

"I don't know what to do, Curt," said Marcia. "I just don't know what to do." She began as though he knew everything and would understand what she meant. "I don't know where to start.

At first, I thought I couldn't see you and then I thought that you'd—help me."

"I'll help you, Marcia," promised Curt, huskily.

"It isn't as if I didn't care for Harleth, Curt," she went on, thinking aloud; "it's because I care so much for him that I must do everything in a way that won't hurt him—that'll be the best for him. You see that, don't you? But how am I to go about it? You're a lawyer, Curt; you can tell me what I must do first—and where to go."

Curtis Jennings moistened his lips before he spoke

"You—you're going to get a divorce?" he asked, with hesitation.

"Yes," said Marcia, nodding her head wearily; "yes. And of course I must leave this house and go somewhere else."

"Marcia, are you—are you going to sue—in this State? There's only one ground, you know. Have you got any evidence that—that—"

Her tired eyes looked at him comprehendingly and a little light came into them.

"No; I'm not going to get a divorce in this State. But can't I go and live somewhere—and then, after a while—"

"Yes, of course," he agreed, eager to spare her. "There are lots of places you can go and live for a year or two—establish a residence, you know—and—and everything would be very simple."

"Only let it be as soon as you can, Curt," she urged.
"The sooner it's over, the better, now."

"But you know, Marcia, I'm no good at handling that sort of thing. My business is just estates and guardianships and things like that. I'll take you to a firm that's up in all this business and that can look out for your interests a great deal better than I could. Not that I won't——"

He paused. Someone was hurrying through the hall, and for one wild moment both Curtis and Marcia thought it was Harleth hastening back. Curtis leaped to his feet, but Marcia sat still, only bending forward and gripping her hands tight together, a wave of eager colour rushing up to her face. It was only a moment. The door was flung open and not Harleth, but Harleth's mother entered with outstretched arms. She did not notice Curt—she did not even see him—but she ran to Marcia, and caught her close. Tears were streaming down her fine old face; she was crying as simply, as pitifully as a child.

"I can't believe it," she sobbed. "I can't believe it. I've heard these things all along, and I thought it was just another piece of Harleth's folly and headstrongness. But to-day I went to him at his office——"

Marcia checked her.

"Don't, Mother," she begged. "You see, Curt's here."

"Oh, what does it matter who's here?" cried the older woman. "Everyone knows, or will know soon, anyway. Forgive me, Curt—I'm not myself, you see. I can't understand—I couldn't believe—Oh, Marcia, Marcia—tell me—you're not going to leave him? He said——"

"I'm just going," interposed Curt, precipitately. "I'll—I'll come again; or you can send for me. Good-bye."

The two women did not notice. They stood, holding to each other, searching each other's eyes.

"What has he done?" asked Harleth's mother. "Can't you forgive him, Marcia? Oh, I know how he is—headstrong, selfish, self-willed. But, oh, Marcia, Harleth's got something good under all that. I know you haven't had an easy time living with him; his father and I didn't have an easy time with him, either. He'll have his own way, no matter what happens, and anybody can pay his breakage but himself. I know. But he isn't *all* bad, Marcia; he's just—oh, my poor Harleth—he's just wild and foolish and obstinate——" She broke off again in tears but Marcia, though she put her arms around her, did not cry.

"I know, I know. It isn't that, Mother. You don't need to explain Harleth to me. I'm not angry with him, or trying to punish him. It isn't that **I** can't forgive him. It's just—it's just that he doesn't

care for me any longer, Mother; he's stopped loving me. He isn't—mine any more. Don't you see that the only thing for me to do is to leave him free—just as soon as I can? What sort of a life should we have if I tried to stay with him? If we're unhappy now—how unhappy should we be then? Don't cry—don't cry. You've been so dear to me that I can't bear to see you suffer like this. But don't you see that I've got to do it?"

"I can't bear to see you suffering, either," sobbed Mrs. Crossey, passionately. "You're like my own child to me. You're a real daughter, Marcia, and you don't know how dear you are to me. It's all Harleth's fault—I *know* it—and I'm his mother. My heart's just breaking for both of you. When I think of you and Baby here in this great house—Oh, come home with me, dear, won't you? Come and stay with me. That will show everyone what Father and I *think* of you—it's the only thing I *can do* for you."

"But, Mother," Marcia hesitated, "if I do that, then there won't be any one who really cares for Harleth who'll be easily accessible for him. He wouldn't want to come to you if I were there. And I'm afraid he's going to need you, terribly."

"Oh, you don't need to think of Harleth, Marcia. I know he's my son, but he's wrong in this and I'm not going to say he's right, even though I am his mother."

"I must think of Harleth," insisted Marcia. "I must. I can't help it. I haven't stopped loving him—it's he who's stopped loving me. He's my husband—he's everything in the world to me. I'm not going to think of anything but him, and how to do what's best for him. He's never done it himself—he can't—it isn't in him. And I've got to."

"Then what are you going to do?" asked Mrs. Crossey Senior. "And what about Baby?"

"Baby's mine," exclaimed Marcia. "I won't give *him* up even for a second. If Harleth tries—But he wouldn't. He's never been so dreadfully fond of Baby, anyway. I was hoping—that when he was a little older and could talk more, Harleth would like him better and find him more interesting. Harleth's always been helpless with him—he's so little and soft, and then he was sick a good bit, too. I don't think many men know what to do with a very little baby, Mother. But I thought that when he was older—a real boy—it would be different."

"And your house! This beautiful house!"

Marcia looked around it, indifferently.

"I thought I cared about it, too, but I don't. I don't want to stay in it another hour. Everything here makes me think—you know—" Her chin quivered.

"Yes, yes, I know. Oh, Marcia" (she paused and checked the words), "you must come home with me

for to-night, anyway—you and Baby. I want you to talk with Father. You will do that, Marcia, won't you?"

Marcia hesitated. She did not want to go. It was the beginning of the end—the first step in the long way of difficulty through which she must go. She looked at her mother-in-law and noted the deepening of the wrinkles in her handsome old face, the anxiety in the tear-red old eyes that slanted ever so little—like Harleth's. She saw the entreaty, and most of all, she saw the genuine affection and the desire to help and shelter her. Yes, she must go—for this one night. It was useless to sit at home nursing her misery. She must rouse herself to action and do this last duty to Harleth.

"I'll go," she said, at last.

When they were ready to leave the house Marcia turned back to give some last words of instruction to Sako. Baby, in the arms of Nurse, was already in the car, but Mrs. Crossey Senior waited in the hall, looking about her with a sorrow and chagrin that she could not conceal. When Marcia came back to her she spoke impulsively:

"It would have been easier for me if he had died. Yes—I'd rather he had died than been—unworthy."

Marcia shrank away from her.

"No, no," she cried. "I don't care what he's

done—or what he is; I want him in this world—whether he's mine or not."

"I can't feel that way," said his mother, pressing her lips together.

It came to Marcia in a burst of shrewd divination that the older woman's strength not to forgive was born again in Harleth's transgressions that so needed forgiveness—and that both were kindred weaknesses.

"But you wouldn't have me feel as you do, Mother?"

"No," said Harleth's mother, after a pause. "No—I suppose not."

CHAPTER XVIII

IT HAD taken a rallying of all her courage to go home with Mrs. Crossey, even for a night, and talk with her and Harleth's father of all that had happened; but the visit ended Marcia's long vigil of despair. She put off the inertia of her grief with all the determination of her pride. Now that she had made up her mind to go, to set Harleth free, even in those first bewildering days of readjustment to this determination she wrapped herself in an even naturalness of manner and of speech. She set herself to the hard business before her with the obvious wish to get it through without dramatics. There should be no weeping on shoulders, no chorus of sympathetic friends, no picturesque setting herself before the world as a *femme incomprise*. A good many people who knew her—and those who knew her least were most inclined that way—murmured that Marcia Crossey seemed just a little bit hard.

But there were many others who knew that she was only trying to put a barrier between herself and the sympathy that is ninety-nine per cent. curiosity. The Raymonds and the Harts were more than kind

—a grateful exception to various others. And Belle Percy, surmising that she would now be welcome, came and stayed with her through the ordeal of closing the house and letting such servants go as she would not require for herself, and receiving Aunt Janey; for Aunt Janey had insisted on coming to Marcia to share her exile with a fine disregard of all the appurtenances of her Chicago residence, away from which she had always insisted she could not exist.

It was Curt Jennings who was her real tower of strength. He had brought lawyers to her—Wilder and Clarke—and had told Oliver Clarke that he (Jennings) would personally and painfully deal out death by slow torture unless Marcia's affairs were looked after in every detail to reassure and protect her. After Oliver Clarke had selected the most advantageous near-by State wherein Marcia should establish "legal residence," it was Curt Jennings who went and penetratingly reviewed the possibilities of a dozen or more small towns and cities. Satisfied as to the location he thereupon turned his attention to choosing a proper house for her, and wore all the real-estate firms of that particular neighbourhood to rags and tatters by his requirements.

Nor did he stop at that. He even superintended her moving and installation. Wasson and Imogen, now united in almost ludicrously harmonious mar-

riage, went with Marcia, and so did Nurse and Cook—all from the Wellsridge house. Aunt Janey's maid, Bocock, was also of the household, and added distinction to it—being much travelled and a native of Boston. Besides these, they needed only a combination gardener and handy man; but he was to be hired locally.

It was Curt, also, who took charge of Marcia's finances, and regulated her expenses by them. The money she had inherited from her grandfather was not sufficient to keep up the sort of big establishment she had had, though it was ample for all possible comforts. He forced her to figure a suitable budget out for herself, and the mental distraction was good for her.

The thing, however, in which Curt Jennings took greatest (though concealed) satisfaction was his first interview with Harleth Crossey. He went to him to tell him that Marcia had put matters into his hands and therefore he would be obliged to ask Harleth for specific information as to his intentions, and the address of his lawyers. It afforded him a particular relish to see Marcia's husband writhe under his blunt questions. Strange; he had always liked Crossey well enough before he began making such a fool of himself, he thought, but now—he only longed to smash him in the face. His manner held the suggestion of his contempt and

antagonism, not very well hidden.' So it was from Curt Jennings—Curt, whom he had always liked honestly and freely—that it was first brought home to Harleth Crossey how what he had done appeared to those who knew him.

Up to this time he had been inclosed in fairly complete self-confidence. His mother's tears and his father's remonstrances he had been used to all his life, hence they were discounted. Marcia had lost her hold over him and her power to bring him to himself under the subtle rule of Leila. The whirl of anger and resentment and imagined injury into which he had been swept by Marcia's arraignment of him and his discovery of her supposed deception, had lasted well under Leila's artful fostering. At that time he had found himself an injured and innocent party—and as an injured and innocent party he continued, in his own eyes. Further, he chose to consider Marcia's departure from their home and her subsequent consultation with lawyers as a wilful effort to coerce him into submission to her wishes. He said as much to Curt.

"If Marcia thinks," he said—sitting in his big office and looking across his great mahogany desk at Curt, who sat stiffly opposite—"If Marcia thinks that I'm to be driven to submit meekly to her whims and humours by going to such lengths, she's very much mistaken."

"I can assure you," retorted Curt, bitingly, "that no such thought has entered Marcia's mind. She doesn't want you to submit to 'whims'—or 'humour.' She wants to get an absolute divorce from you—in a quiet, decent way. She doesn't want any money from you, but she does want to keep the child—though she won't prevent your seeing him at any time you wish—at your mother's house, you understand. You'd better accept the conditions, Crossey, and not make things any more difficult—for yourself, or for Marcia, either—than they are."

"You may as well keep your advice to yourself, Curt," snapped Harleth, huffily. "I dare say my lawyers will have a thing or two to say about it."

"I'm not here as Marcia's lawyer, I'm here as her friend and adviser, that's all. Her lawyers are Wilder and Clarke, and if you'll name yours, a conference can be arranged between them."

"If you're a friend of Marcia's," Harleth Crossey answered, unpleasantly, "I should think you would try to show her what a perfectly outrageous business all this is, anyway. She's behaving like a hysterical, flighty——"

To Harleth Crossey's intense surprise, Curtis Jennings jumped to his feet and pounded the desk between them with his clenched fist.

"You shut your damned mouth!" he shouted. "You're not fit to mention your wife's name."

CHAPTER XIX

THE two men eyed each other in glowering confusion. It is embarrassing to swear at a fellow with whom formerly you have been on the best of terms. It is also embarrassing to be sworn at by a fellow with whom formerly you have been on the best of terms.

A second after that hearty "damn" was out of his mouth, Curt Jennings regretted his violence; it was deserved, but he had not intended to show how much he was Marcia's partisan. And through Harleth Crossey's consciousness came the first faint glimmering of real rebuke that he had experienced. If this was the way Curt—good old Curt—felt about him, perhaps—perhaps—he was not in such an impregnable position as he had flattered himself.

Curt Jennings straightened up, his face red, his manner still stiff and truculent.

"I think that's about all I have to say. In the future, all communications will come from Wilder and Clarke to your attorneys."

Harleth Crossey cleared his throat.

"Look here, Curt; don't go away like this. You

don't understand anything about it. You think there's only one side to this business."

"*I know* there's only one side to it," interjected Curt, sharply, "and that's Marcia's side. You don't remember, I suppose, that I was one of the guests at your house when this affair started, and I've been pretty well informed ever since about how it has gone on. Don't try to put any of the blame of it on Marcia—not to me; I know better. And I want to tell you this, Crossey. I've seen a good many damned fools in my life who've done just what you've done—run after another woman when he had a wife at home that was worth ten thousand of the woman he neglected her for—but I never saw a man who was as big a damned fool as you. For the sake of a cheap little tuppenny-ha'penny bit of paint and feathers, you've chucked a woman like Marcia. Good God! I could find it in my heart to be sorry for you, if I thought you were worth it."

"That's pretty rough talk," said Harleth. He was controlling himself with visible effort.

"I meant it to be rough, and I stand by every word of it. So do all of Marcia's friends."

He ended the interview with a brusque nod and went out, glad enough that he had had the chance to say these things to Harleth. He would have been even more glad if he had known how deep an impression they made. They tore away from Harleth

Crossey the veil of self-deception with which he had hidden his faults from his own eyes. They forced him—unwillingly—to judge himself by the standards of his own sex and his own kind. They dealt a healthy shock to his selfish youthfulness—that youthfulness that had persisted through years that should have brought him responsibility and sober self-knowledge. He was obliged to relinquish, to himself, something of the pose of the “spoiled boy”—the boy who wilfully wanted anything that took his fancy and wilfully pursued it, and wilfully denied the right of time or circumstance to judge him wrong in so doing. For the first time in his life, he seriously questioned the wisdom of something he had done, and deliberately took stock of what this last rash adventure had cost him.

It was not a very reassuring display, though he approached, first, its least important factors. He had liked his big house, with its perfectly adjusted mechanism of service; he had liked the easy, friendly society of Wellsridge, and all its hospitality and the appurtenances thereof. These things were gone. He was already missing them and he knew he would miss them more, and keenly.

And then he went deeper. Wincing, he forced himself to think of his little son. It was true that he had been afraid to touch the little squirming pink-and-white lump of flesh, and that he was not deeply

interested in the daily budget of nursery news. But after all, he was his own boy—Harleth Junior—and he had had vague dreams of Exeter and Harvard for him—and seeing him grow up into—. He twisted himself away from that thought impatiently. Just now he could not wish that Harleth Junior should grow into the same sort of man as his father.

So—he had lost his home and his son. And his wife. A hundred tormenting thoughts of Marcia assailed him, now that he had let them in. There was Marcia at breakfast with him in a particularly lovely lace négligé that he had noticed because of the way that her rose-and-ivory shoulders showed warmly under its transparency. There was Marcia with her household books, flushing because he laughed at them; Marcia in the mellow, golden lights of the house she had planned with so much care and patience, a skilful, gentle hostess; Marcia's trick of pressing her cheek against his coat sleeve, and leaving a little kiss there in moments of special tenderness when they were alone; Marcia in a low chair, with the baby at her breast, her dark head bent, showing the beautiful line of her neck; Marcia serious, Marcia gay, Marcia mocking, Marcia patient, Marcia loving him—Marcia—

He got up and walked violently about his office. He reminded himself, sharply that Marcia had been unreasonable and very unjust. That she had had

him spied on. That she had lied to him to trap him into damaging admissions. That she had turned his father and mother against him. That she had taken matters into her own hands in undignified haste and had forced action on him. That it was she who had left him and not he who had left her. That it was she who had first consulted lawyers. That she had put him into an abominable position by refusing to receive any of the money he would gladly have settled on her and his son. That she had insisted on keeping the child to herself, allowing his father to see him only at stated intervals and under conditions of her own imposing. That it was she who had transformed Curt Jennings and the rest of the Wellsridge community, to say nothing of all their other friends, into a pack of merciless judges.

He wanted to believe this indictment of Marcia—wanted to with all his soul. But something—it might have been Curt Jennings's voice: "You're not fit to mention your wife's name"—uneasily prevented full belief.

Perhaps—perhaps—Marcia might forgive him even now. Perhaps if he went to her, and told her he had not intended— If he could blot out that last painful scene from her memory; if he could only make her see that he was not what she had thought; if he gave her his word that she had suspected him

wrongly—yes, she *had* suspected! His stubborn pride again took fire at the word. He wouldn't humble himself and beg her forgiveness when she had thought that of him. He couldn't.

His thoughts made an abrupt turn. Leila!

His sense of injury deepened further. What had he done but try to make Leila's life a little more bearable—Leila, who was a friend of Marcia—Leila, who had had so much and had lost it and had found life so hard and unkind—Leila, who, in spite of all this, put up a plucky front to the world and would not let any one see how terribly she was suffering. Except himself. *He* had penetrated that courageous mask. He had discovered what a gentle and feminine Leila that glittering hard manner of hers hid from a callous world. He almost convinced himself that it was true—all this.

Almost, but not quite. A mocking little devil of common sense persisted in looking him in the eye and asking, boldly: "Well, what are you going to do about it? Do you propose to marry Leila after Marcia gets her divorce? That's what she's expecting, you know. And what sort of a wife do you imagine *she'll* make?" And try as he would, Harleth Crossey could not banish that particular devil nor answer its impertinence.

He stopped his restless prowling about his office, sat down at his desk, and rang for his *secretary*.

Work might be a welcome alternative to thought. There were a lot of odds and ends of business that he might as well clean up. He dug them out painfully, here and there, called for letter files, reports, and various collections of data, and concentrated himself on the task. His secretary, who had been having a beautiful session of idleness—which she was using to read “A Girl of the Limberlost”—sighed and wondered if she couldn’t get a job somewhere where the boss wasn’t so temperamental. She could see that this attack of hard labour was due to last for weeks.

The news of Marcia’s actual going did not reach Leila by way of Harleth Crossey, but, strangely enough, through her father, who retailed garrulously one evening at dinner that he’d met Ollie Clarke, who’d told him that Marcia Crossey and her husband had split, and that Marcia was going to get a divorce. Mr. Templeton added, further, that he was sorry, for he had always liked Marcia and thought her a fine girl, but that Harleth Crossey was a spoiled young cub and always had been. Of his daughter’s connection with the affair he was benignly ignorant, so much so that he asked Leila if she had seen Marcia lately and heard anything of her domestic tragedy. Leila shrugged her shoulders.

“Dear me, no,” she said. “Marcia’s had very little use for me since we’ve lost our money, Father.”

Then, to lead him further afield, "Belle Percy's exactly the same—she's hardly civil to me."

Mr. Templeton, who had had some very unpleasant times with his womenfolk concerning the downfall of his fortunes, did not pursue the subject. He had had plenty of fair-weather friends, too, poor old man, and did not doubt but that what Leila said was true.

Indeed, what she said of Belle was quite true. They had chanced to be placed side by side at a morning *musical* and between numbers had conducted an acrimonious conversation that soon degenerated into furious feline clawing. Leila had smiled amusedly at Belle's cool "How d'ye do" and had whispered:

"You don't have to speak to me, Belle, if you don't want to, you know. Don't let the mere fact of our having known each other from the cradle deter you from any rudeness now."

To which malicious challenge Belle had made prompt reply:

"You needn't take that tone with me, Leila. I spoke to you before I thought, anyway."

Leila reddened and began an angry retort, but thought better of it. She really didn't mean to quarrel with Belle, only she was such a fat pincushion of a person that one involuntarily stuck pins in her. She composed her features and answered with appealing frankness:

"I never thought that you'd turn on me and treat me as so many other people have done, Belle. It's hard enough to be poor, you know, without losing all one's friends, too."

Belle eyed her, stonily.

"Your being poor has nothing to do with the way I treat you, and you know it, so don't bother to be pathetic. I know you perfectly well, Leila, and I know your methods with men, but I never expected to see them used to break up the marriage of one of your best friends. How Harleth Crossey can be such a perfect idiot is more than I can understand."

"Thanks. You needn't say anything more, Belle. The mere fact that what you say isn't true—*as usual*—will have no possible weight with you, I know. So go ahead and spread your scandal; you'll find it much easier because I have no way of defending myself."

Belle, being thoroughly aroused, could not forbear one more nasty scratch.

"You hardly flatter yourself that he'll marry you after Marcia divorces him, I suppose—unless, perhaps, you can trap him into it in some way. No one thinks he will—he'll know you much too well by that time."

The hostess of the musicale was not pleased to see one of her guests leaving in apparent agitation in the middle of one of her pet baritone's best songs. She

could not identify her at the distance, but she thought the departing one might be Miss Templeton. She wondered a little about it and then forgot it.

Sylvan solitudes had little charm for Leila as a general rule, but to-day she turned gratefully to the quiet and seclusion of the Park. There she would not be likely to see any one she knew, and she did not want to see any one she knew until she had time to recover from her vicious encounter with Belle. She had not thought Belle capable of such violence.

Nevertheless, though the conversation with Belle had been a brutal battle, and she had lost, Leila had gained from it something of distinct advantage to herself. She was astute enough to know that what Belle had said about Harleth Crossey not intending to marry her when he was divorced, had a kernel of dangerous truth in it. She knew Harleth Crossey very well, far better than he knew himself, and, having gone so far, she had no intention of losing him at the last. She assured herself that she was not likely to do better.

Leila had not intended this ending when the affair commenced. All she wanted at that time was to make Marcia uncomfortable and divert herself until someone more worth while should engage her attention. But Harleth had proved to be so amusing, so generous, so easily led along and flattered—and no one else *had* passed within matrimonial range—

that she had not found it hard to foresee a future wherein Marcia should be eliminated and Harleth quite free to marry again.

Whether or not she ultimately married Harleth, there was one thing she decided on—that he must be made to want to marry her. She could feel that this separation from Marcia and the irritations and possible humiliations of a divorce suit might react on his impulsive nature to turn him violently and suddenly against her. She foresaw that he might very possibly blame her for all. She must, therefore, be careful. She must not seem to expect anything from him. She must be over-kind, over-generous, delicately solicitous for him, yet holding herself aloof from him, so that he might feel that it was him alone and his well-being she was concerned for, and not herself. She reasoned it out, step by step, her long eyes narrowing thoughtfully, and her lips pressed together more firmly than was her wont. It was cold and she walked fast and far.

A little four-year-old, in a furry coat and round bowl of a hat, ran confidently toward her and looked at the pretty lady invitingly. He was tired of playing alone and his nurse was talking with another nurse farther down the walk. He would have liked a little attention and he was all ready to smile and say "Hello" if she had smiled at him. But Leila did not notice her small admirer and so he backed

away again and went to his nurse, downcast that his friendliness had not been rewarded in kind. A strutting tin duck on wheels, found in his play-basket, consoled him; and a little later, when he pulled the duck after him up the walk, he had forgotten the pretty lady who had walked so fast and been so intent on something far away that she had not seen him.

CHAPTER XX

L EILA had convinced herself that the thing to do was to wait and let Harleth come to her. If he did that—if he made the first move—it would mean that he could not do without her. She did not dare risk a repulse by seeking him. She would not write or telephone, or send any message. She would simply wait. If he sought her, she knew that she could hold him ever after. If he did not—But she would not go into that. She felt secure that he would come. The only concession she made was to be readily accessible. She would stay at home until—she knew.

She felt fairly assured that he would not fail her. He was the sort of man who needed sympathy, flattery, approval, and she was not mistaken in thinking that there was precious little of these pleasant attentions directed toward him at the present time by any one who knew both him and Marcia. Therefore—he must turn to her, Leila. Unless, as she had imagined before, a revulsion of feeling stronger than his need for sympathy should take him away from her forever.

Her uneasy mind shuttlecocked between the two ideas. It was a long day and a long night that drew themselves to a slow close while she waited. And another long day succeeded. Whenever the telephone rang, she hurried to answer it, in a tremour of nerves, but it was never Harleth. A call from her dressmaker about an overdue bill; a call from an acquaintance who wanted the address of a man who had expertly mended one of Leila's pearl-handled fans; a call from a laundry which was drumming up trade through the telephone; a call from an old friend of her mother. She answered them curtly, impatiently, hating the irksome necessity of answering at all, since they were not what she wanted.

She had a great deal of leisure for thought while she waited, and at times her forebodings drove her almost frantic. Was she to lose out now, after all she had endured (she phrased it so to herself)? After all the stupid thwartings and disappointments that life had brought to her thus far, was she to have yet another? It was unbearable—unthinkable. She grew feverish with the injustice of it—the miserable, relentless injustice of it all.

But she would not give up her conviction that Harleth would come. He must come. He must. She forgot to look in the mirror. She did not dress. She ate only enough to keep her from actual hunger—mechanically, not savouring the food. The two

servants, thinking that she must be sick, pressed clumsy attentions on her, and to get rid of them she owned to a headache and shut herself in her room.

But at last—after a lapse of uncounted time that seemed to her to have grown from weeks to months, to weary years—the telephone rang and it was he. One of the maids knocked timidly at her door and said:

“Mr. Crossey wants to speak to you, miss.”

There were relief and anxiety in her voice as she answered him, though she tried to keep them out.

“Is that you, Harleth—— Yes, I’m very well, a little headache, that’s all—— You want to see me?—— We might go to dinner somewhere, I suppose—— Yes, I’ll meet you; at seven—— Some quiet place—— Just street clothes, yes—— Good-bye.”

It was all utterly commonplace, but it gave her an immense hope. It was significant of so much. He *had* turned to her, and not away from her, as she had feared. (She acknowledged to herself, now, how much she had feared.) But the game was not won yet, by any means. She must keep her head clear for this meeting.

Leila made herself, carefully, a little late and Harleth was there before her. He came to meet her, smiling, but there was a new gravity in his eyes; something of his look of reckless boyishness was

gone. He seemed older, a little worn, gentler, more kind. Leila welcomed the change; it meant that he would be easier to deal with, and in that she was not disappointed.

They had a secluded table and while they were eating, he spoke quite frankly and simply.

"Marcia's really gone," he said. "She's left me. Perhaps you knew. She isn't—coming back."

Leila looked at him sympathetically and nodded. She could not be quite sure what would be best to say, and trusted to silence.

"The house is closed. I've seen her lawyers and everything's settled. She wouldn't take anything from me—not even money for Junior."

Leila lowered her lashes to hide a flash of triumph. The more Marcia did not take, the more there would be left for—

"Of course, I'm going to set aside a fund for him," went on Harleth, "and when he's old enough, he'll have it. They've gone into another State—and taken a house. As soon as she can establish residence there, and it will be legal, she's going to get a divorce." He hesitated over this, but forced himself to say it.

Again Leila kept silence. She would inform herself of the divorce laws of all the near-by commonwealths at the earliest opportunity, she resolved. But there was no need.

"It takes two years," Harleth was saying. "Of course I shan't put any obstacles in her way. Not that it would be any use; the thing's done, so can't be undone now. She's determined to do it and everyone's urging her on and making me out all kinds of an impossible brute. I——"

"How mean! How unfair!" broke in Leila, "to attack you—when you've done nothing."

"I've done enough," replied Harleth, brusquely. "And I've made all kinds of a fool of myself. I can see that. But I—I don't know—I suppose I wasn't responsible most of the time. I've been drinking too much, I know that." Leila suddenly realized that he had taken only one cocktail and had not touched the wine beside his plate. "I wouldn't have thought, though, that all my friends would have been so anxious to kick me when I'm down. Curt Jennings came into my office and literally bawled me out. I thought he was going to hit me."

"Imagine fat, flabby old Curt trying to hit you! I think—don't misunderstand me, Harleth, but I think—indeed, I'm pretty sure that Curt always had a weakness for Marcia. That's why he's such a champion."

"Oh, that's nonsense," said Harleth, frowning. "Don't get that into your head. He wasn't any more to Marcia than he was to me."

"Perhaps not," she yielded, instantly. "I'll tell

you now something that I hadn't intended to tell you. I sat beside Belle at a musicale the other morning and she—she attacked me—oh, dreadfully. She said such things—such things, Harleth——” She paused and looked at him. Easily summoned tears glittered in her eyes.

“Poor Leila. We're partners in disgrace, aren't we? You're about the only friend I have left. I've felt pretty forlorn over this thing, I tell you. I—I wanted to see someone who didn't treat me like a pariah. Even Mother——” He stopped.

“Oh, Harleth!” cried Leila, softly, “it's dear and good of you to say that to me. I—I needed it.”

For the rest of the evening she was very winning, very thoughtful with him. The time had come when she must take her line—which was to make herself indispensable to him. She soothed him out of his despondent moment and then, by gradual stages and with a little raillery, changed his mood into something brighter. After a while they were laughing together, and he had recovered his spirit. They talked no more of Marcia or Curt or Belle or anything that was troubling them.

But at the end of the evening, as on that night before when he had come to her after the scene with Marcia, Harleth left with a word of serious import for the future.

“I shall be hanging around you a great deal.

You won't find me a nuisance? You'll try and put up with me, won't you, Leila?"

She gave him both her hands.

"You know the answer to that," she said, smiling.

He took one of her hands and laid it against his cheek.

"You have nice hands," he remarked, irrelevantly. Then: "If you'll help me, we can get things straight after a while. It's just a question of waiting. Do you—want to wait?"

"I want to wait," she answered.

After he had left her, Harleth Crossey walked slowly up the dimly lighted street. It had been raining earlier in the evening and there was a sweet freshness in the night air. He tapped the pavement reflectively with his stick as he walked along.

"I've done one decent thing," he said, slowly, aloud. "I've not shirked that responsibility, anyway. Even Marcia might be willing to grant that. I'd done one decent thing—if she knew."

CHAPTER XXI

BUT Marcia did not know. Marcia was very busy. The house Curt Jennings had so painstakingly found for her was not over large, but it had to be painted, papered, furnished, and generally set in order. Moreover, she was doing all this with everything new—for she had taken nothing with her from her “golden house”—not even the smallest and most personal bits of furniture and ornaments. Her trunks were packed only with her clothes, and a few photographs and gifts that had come to her from her own family or her friends. Even Baby’s nursery was to be outfitted anew.

Aunt Janey, observing this, had tried to hold her tongue, but finally she could not keep back a protest.

“My dear—please don’t think me meddling and troublesome—but aren’t you just weakly giving way to sentiment? You ought to take the things from your own room. And from that very convenient little sitting room. And your china. And your silver. *And your linen.*” Aunt Janey could not fathom a woman who could permit beautiful linen to get out of her possession so easily.

"Don't let's talk about it," said Marcia, coaxingly. "Let it go that I'm weakly giving way to sentiment. It's better to give way to sentiment now and then and not try to be a Spartan all the time. At least, it is with me. Being a Spartan constantly is beyond my powers, Aunt Janey." Her face changed and sobered. "And I couldn't bear to see these things about me—in another house; I couldn't bear it," she added, vehemently.

So Aunt Janey was silenced, but she was not convinced. She told Belle in confidence:

"It's unnatural and unwise, I'm sure, the calm way Marcia's behaving. She's scarcely told me a thing since I came, except the bare fact that she has left Harleth and is going to get a divorce as soon as she can establish—legal residence, I believe they call it—in another State, for the proper length of time. When I naturally pressed her for reasons, she said that he'd stopped caring for her and that it wasn't possible for her to go on as his wife in such circumstances, and please not to ask her anything more. She hasn't said another word about it, and she seems quite herself about everything, only now and then something comes up, like this exaggerated wish not to take things from her home. I can't help feeling that she displays little of what, in my young day, was called a suitable sensibility. I don't understand it, Belle."

"Neither do I," answered Belle. "If I were Marcia, I'd probably be crying my eyes out all day long. It's too tragic—I suppose she doesn't dare let herself stop to think about it."

"Is Harleth—is Harleth—" whispered Aunt Janey; "do you know if he's still following about that disgusting—person?" Which was the nearest Aunt Janey's "suitable sensibilities" could come to naming Leila.

Belle raised hopeless eyebrows.

"Everyone says so—and I imagine everyone's right." Then she dodged away from the subject. "It was very good of you, Miss Janey, to leave your own home and come and help Marcia through this dreadful time."

Aunt Janey's vague lips took an oddly determined line.

"I'm her nearest of kin," she said, with dignity. "No matter what the sacrifice might be, I'm prepared to make it. I only hope—it may seem unworthy, but I can't help it—I can't *help* hoping that in this town we're going to there'll be a few people who really *know* auction."

"If there aren't, I'll import three auction sharps for you," promised Belle. "It would be a shame if you couldn't have the one amusement you care for. Don't worry about that."

"That's very sweet of you, my dear; I wouldn't

like to bother Marcia about anything so trivial at this time. And then she's so absorbed in getting this new house ready. Did you know that it's to be absolutely different from—theirs, in every way? She's going in for American Colonial, and she's ransacking the shops for maple and cherry and mahogany, and the things that go with that period. She simply wears herself out over it, I tell her. But she won't listen to me."

And the good creature sighed. She did not see that the painstaking energy with which Marcia hunted furnishings for this new house was nothing but a desperate make-shift to fill the time until she could adjust herself to this new and strange life without Harleth. She did not see that the search for old dressers and highboys and Duncan Pfyfe tables was a grim business of cheating her torturing memories, and quieting her aching heart. As soon as it was possible she went to the new dwelling and superintended the painters and plumbers and paper hangers, and as soon as the last of them had departed, leaving trails of white splotches and greasy thumb marks, empty paint cans and discarded waste, and all the other whiffy débris of their trade, Marcia fell to the task of furnishing in a whirl of activity. She measured for curtains and hemmed many of them herself; she made long, tiresome searches for old brass handles which would match

other brass handles of some old chest, or for lustres of just the right proportion for certain spaces above the fireplace, or for old Lowestoft to put in her cupboards—anything that she might make a pretext to keep her days from lapsing into brooding inertia.

It was not until the place was so well arranged that she was hard put to it to find even imaginary needs for it that she stopped to catch breath and look about her, and take stock of the future. This was due somewhat to a remonstrance from Curt Jennings, who was still her chief reliance and could say many things that Aunt Janey and Belle could not. He was very downright about it.

"Why do you spend so much time on your house?" he asked. "When it's all done, it won't mean so very much to you, unless you intend to go in for collecting bottles, or samplers, or old glass, or something like that. And you haven't got the real collector's spirit, which is something between an æsthetic and a birdsnester. Better get acquainted with some of the people in town and be in touch with something alive—not just brass and cretonne."

Marcia had been surprisingly docile.

"Yes," she said, "I suppose I must do that. At first, you see, I couldn't. It was only by thinking very hard all the time about these things that don't **really** matter at all that I kept myself from going

crazy. But now that first awful frenzy is over, and I can bear to see people and talk to them."

"There are a lot of nice people in this little place," said Curt, stolidly, giving no hint of how much her confession of unhappiness moved him. "Really nice, I mean. If you say the word I'll have my cousins call. The Burds, you know. Justine Burd was Justine Jennings; I don't think you ever met her at my house, though maybe you met her husband. I don't remember. She's been wanting to come, but I held her off. And then there are some people named Dashiell—two girls in the family—musical, but not offensively so. You might like them. And you know Oliver Clarke lives over at Torreytown—that's only twenty miles. Mrs. Ollie'll come like a shot if you'll let her. She's all right. Talks a lot. Makes things go."

Marcia considered.

"I'd like to see them," she said at last. "There's no good my sitting about and acting forlorn. I won't be stared at and pitied; but—well, you know I haven't been exactly in the mood to meet strangers, and it will please Aunt Janey to have people coming; Belle keeps reminding me about Aunt Janey's passion for auction. I suppose I ought to do my duty there."

"You certainly ought," agreed Curt. Aunt Janey bored him prodigiously and he could not see how

Marcia endured her, but if Aunt Janey's passion for auction could be turned to any advantage for Marcia, by all means he would use it. "It must be ghastly dull for her here. I suppose in Chicago she had her little group of serious auctionites—or should I call them auctioneers?"

"It *is* dull for her," admitted Marcia, contritely. "Oh, you're perfectly right, Curt. I've got to make the plunge, I suppose. I couldn't have done it when we first came out here, but I can manage it now. I'm not going to pose as a blighted being, you know. If I may venture on a bromide, I suppose I've really got a lot to be thankful for. Money, for instance."

"What d'you mean, 'money'?" asked Curt, surprised.

"Oh, suppose I hadn't had any money of my own, Curt, and suppose Aunt Janey hadn't any. I couldn't earn a decent living at *anything*, to save my life. I might make enough for myself somehow, just a bare living, but I couldn't make enough for myself and Baby. I know that. I'm not trained to do anything—I'm not so clever as Imogen, if it comes to taking care of myself. Well, then. I'd have had to stay with Harleth, wouldn't I?—and put up with conditions as they were, no matter what he did and how I felt? Unless I chose to threaten him with scandal and literally blackmail him out of enough money for my support."

"'Blackmail' is hardly the word. He owes you support."

"I don't know whether he does or not. Alimony is just blackmail in a whole lot of cases, Curt. It's the money men pay for making mistakes. You see how it is with Harleth. He thought he loved me and we were married. After a while he finds out that he doesn't love me at all. For his mistake I'm saddled on him to support for life, only in my case I had enough money that I didn't need to be. How unspeakable it must be for the women who haven't any money when they find out—what I found out."

"That's the most ridiculous thing I ever heard you say," remarked Curt with energy. "You just get that rubbish out of your head as fast as you can. Of course, I can see that you wouldn't want to take Harleth's money; and of course sometimes alimony is nothing but blackmail—levied by women who are too lazy to work for themselves and haven't any self-respect, anyway. But take it by and large, a man who marries ought to provide for his wife—especially after he's practically deserted her. I can't see it any other way."

Marcia flinched at the word "deserted." She looked at Curt wistfully. She was not so thin and pale as she had been, though she was far from being her old, radiant self.

"Have you—have you seen Harleth lately, Curt?" she asked, hesitatingly.

"No," he answered, avoiding her glance. But she knew it was not true.

"You have, Curt—you have! I know it. Where was he and how was he looking? I suppose he was with Leila and that's why you won't tell me."

Curt Jennings flamed an embarrassed crimson at this chance hit.

"He looked all right," he said, hastily. "He looked just as usual."

And more than that he would not say, but bade her an abrupt good-bye and went away.

"The truth is," he told himself, heavily, on the long way back to New York; "the truth is, I've got about as much show with her as I ever had, which is exactly none at all. But there" (brightening at the thought) "it won't be so very long before she'll be legally free of him, and that's something. As long as she was his wife I hadn't a chance, but maybe—after a while—if I'm very patient and make myself so useful she can't get along without me——"

He began to lay out a campaign of usefulness—not that he could do much more than he had done and was doing. Yet he was determined on greater effort. He would waste no time. By the time the final papers of that divorce suit were filed he wanted to be sure of Marcia's gratitude and dependence

upon him for counsel and companionship and help in every way a woman may accept help from a man. If he could achieve so much, he might surely expect something more from her. He had never cared for any one else, and he knew he never would—no, not even if every hope of her were denied him. And he would serve her faithfully, no matter what the outcome. There was nothing to prevent—hope.

CHAPTER XXII

CURT JENNINGS lost no time in passing the word to Justine Burd that she might call on Marcia, and that he, Curt, would thank her to put some society in Marcia's way that would be enlivening, but not rackety. Justine, though she rather resented the latter adjective, had been on the whole sympathetic.

"I think you might trust me to do the right thing, Curt," she remarked, with cousinly freedom. "I know a *few* people who manage to keep clear of front-page notoriety. Any one might think, to hear you talk, that Dick and I are regular *rounders*."

"Dick, I grant you, is all right," teased Curt. "But you were never any too steady a character, Justine, and you know it. Getting acquainted with Mrs. Crossey may help you."

"You're very impertinent, but, as we used to say so witheringly when we were kids, I consider the source. Seriously, though, I'll call—gladly. I'm awfully sorry for her—it's just as if she were a widow, only you can't condole with her. I know how cut up I'd feel if Dickie behaved the way her husband

has. D'you think she'd enjoy a little quiet bridge, or a luncheon; and does she golf?"

"Yes, she golfs, and pretty well, though she isn't a fiend for it. I know you'll like her. You might send some other people to call, too, as soon as you've been yourself. Of course you can do a lot for her if you want to."

Which tactful speech saved the day for Marcia—since Mrs. Burd interpreted it, and rightly, to mean that she was the local leader of society, and that whatever she did would be observed and followed. She called on Marcia forthwith and voted her and her house, Harleth Junior and Aunt Janey, individually and collectively, all that was delightful and charming.

She was quite a delightful and charming little person herself, Justine Burd, being blonde and vivacious, well-poised and keen-witted, yet possessed of a disarmingly gentle manner. She did not care a great deal about women and did not go in for sudden feminine intimacies, but something in Marcia's nature four-squared with her own, and they liked each other from first sight. To Aunt Janey, who had been pining for a livelier life, and had not, as had Marcia, the distractions of furnishing and fitting the house, Mrs. Burd was superlatively welcome as opening endless vistas of auction.

With the acquaintance of Mrs. Richard Burd an established fact, other callers promptly followed.

The Dashiell girls, of whom Curt had made mention, the Smalls, the Harbesons, the Ira Jameses—in fact, the whole local Blue Book. Aunt Janey joined a Bridge Club of contemporaries and became a creature of smiles and placidities. Though Marcia could not yet bring herself to go out freely, the meeting of new people and the renewal of her own hospitality, even so simply, helped her through the winter without the devastating unhappiness that she had anticipated. Agreeable trivialities, if persisted in as a duty, dull the edge of mental suffering. If you give a crying child a drink of cool water nine times out of ten his sobbing will end, and the worst grown-up bereavement and humiliation will often draw a wisp of grateful endurance from a cup of tea and an hour of human companionship.

So the winter and spring were got through, and when the summer came Marcia moved her household to a quiet little shore place, made up of a single inn and a colony of cottagers—among whom were the Burds—who had kept the place to themselves and excluded the general public and all so-called amusements that might bring upon them the plague of the all-day excursionist. Belle came and stayed with Marcia, and Curt was frequently at the Inn. Several of Aunt Janey's cronies were members of the colony and though she had at first protested violently against facing the sea breezes—for what was to her

the sufficient reason that they made her hair stringy and untidy—she was induced by Belle to fortify her appearance by a “permanent wave,” and this reconciled her. Baby was so daring a sailor boy that Marcia was tempted to tether him with a rope at every bathing hour, and only Nurse’s plea that her darling be spared such an indignity, and her solemn promise not to let go of his hand for an instant, prevented it; for the roughest breakers were only jokes to his youthful mind.

There was almost nothing to do. There was nothing to see except the crawl of the foam-tipped waves against the shallow beach. Now and again a smudge of smoke, or a tiny silhouetted sail would tell of the far-away passing of ships. Sometimes the fog would roll in and cover the sea and sky and beach with mysterious gray shadows, and sometimes the sun would beat down and turn the sea into turquoise and the sand into tarnished gold. The life was primitive but not uncomfortable, though Cook grumbled at having no gas range, and all the servants bitterly inveighed against the kerosene lamps and the lack of moving pictures. Marcia invented errands to send them up to town overnight, now and then, and thus kept them semi-contented. Wasson and Imogen, whose marriage was almost prosaically happy, were the only ones who did not constantly long for urban joys. They were real pioneers.

It all seemed strange to Marcia—dream-like and unsubstantial. She would sit on the beach in the shadow of her big umbrella and listen to the babble of the children playing about, their voices rising clear and flute-like against the never-ending hoarse whisper of the sea, and she would wonder whether it could be real or if she would not some time waken and find that it all was a troubled fantasy. Once in the night she started suddenly from sleep calling "Harleth." And always she thought of him—thought of him with such intensity that at times he seemed close to her very touch. She lived two lives: the life of everyday—ordering her house and her servants, playing with her child, talking trifles to Aunt Janey, taking her small part in the community—and another life which was all with Harleth, wondering about him, hoping and fearing for him, remembering each small instance of their days together and always and always pouring out her love to him.

All this was new. At first she had held her thoughts resolutely from him, and when he forced himself into them it had tortured her. She had had moments when she hated him, despised him, longed to hurt him, but these had passed and, as they receded, the old Harleth had come back, the Harleth she knew and loved. These dreams of him consoled and comforted her, while she knew them for dreams.

But, dreaming or not, the sea air and the summer sun put more flesh on Marcia's bones and tanned her ruddily. She swam every day, sometimes in the surf and sometimes in the little lagoon behind and beyond the colony houses—an arm of the ocean that twisted back into the pine woods and made a safe retreat for bathing when the water was rough outside. And there was a tennis court beside the Inn where Belle and Curt finally persuaded her into a set, and the victory she won over them, as they raced plumply and perspiring about, provoked her into the first real burst of laughter that they had heard from her in all the weary months that lay between her and happiness.

"Oh—oh!" she laughed. "If you two could only see yourselves! That's game set for me, please notice."

Belle waved a racket in pretended wrath, but she turned to Curt and said softly:

"I'd be willing to be twice as fat as I am to make her laugh like that—and that's a magnificent concession from a woman."

But Curt did not hear. He was looking at Marcia, and for once his eyes forgot to be cautious. Belle was startled into silence and gravity by what she saw therein. "Poor old Curt," she thought, "I felt there was something under all his kindness. He, too! It's hard luck."

But when she looked again Curt had recovered himself and was picking up balls with a humorous flourish.

"A few more slaughters like this," he panted, "and I'll be thin enough to beat you all to smithereens, Miss Marcia. So look out for yourself."

"Oh, very well," mocked Marcia, still laughing. "I'll play you any time you like. It'll be wonderful practice for me—almost as good as hiring a professional."

So with tennis and laughter again among Marcia's accomplishments, the end of the summer came and the migration back to the mahogany-and-chintz home of her exile. It seemed more of a real home to come back to it after an absence, and less of a temporary domicile for unpleasant reasons.

Even so, she found herself a victim of an uneasy restlessness and a growing discontent. She had made more friends, and with the coming in of winter she was drawn into a round of small social affairs that were neither interesting nor amusing to her. They filled the time and that was all, and her mind, which had stood benumbed through the worst of her trial, now demanded something more than trivialities. She was confronted with the problem of the well-to-do woman whose family cares are light, to whom society does not appeal, yet has no creative talent to demand training and expression. Marcia did not paint or

write or sing, save as an utter amateur, well aware of her utter amateurishness. She did not, as Curt had truly said, have the collector's fever. Nor did she have the naïve, humourless yearning for indiscriminate "culture" noticeable among so many unattached females, nor the flair for publicity which leads many others to identify themselves with public works and deceive themselves into thinking that the buzziness of continual committee meetings and report-makings is world progress. In her perplexity she consulted Justine Burd.

"Can't we do something real?" she asked, impatiently. "You're a clever woman and you've got a brain—and I've got energy, at least. Isn't there something we could do with our spare time besides going to teas and clubs and card parties and dressmakers? I'm restless. I don't want so much time to think. Understand me, Justine" (they had progressed to the first-name stage of intimacy), "I don't want to be charitable to other people; I want to be charitable to myself. My motives are first of all purely selfish—I want to get away from myself. But after that—isn't there some kind of service, to somebody, that I could work at that would be worth a little? Humbly and decently, you know—not condescendingly, or as a favour. Surely there must be something besides serving on the Board of the Children's Home, or joining the missionary society."

Justine laughed, but she was a very practical little person.

"There's one thing we might do," she said, speculatively. "I've always wanted to, but I never had the nerve to try it alone. You know the Italian settlement on the east side of town? Well, I'd like to have classes in English for the grown men and women. I talked with one of the old women once, and she lamented to me that she couldn't read or write English and it left her so out of touch with her children. There aren't any night schools here for them to go to. I don't know very much, but I'm sure I could teach the alphabet and the first reader, and I write really an unmodernly neat hand."

"It sounds possible," said Marcia. "Let's investigate a little and see what we can find out. Teaching the alphabet and the first reader is about the most I can do, I know. I've a smattering of Italian and maybe that would help."

"But for heaven's sake, let's keep it *quiet*. I don't want any one to get the idea that I'm one of these priggish come-let-us-improve-the-common-peepul sort of women—all drab raincoat and hideous hat."

"You needn't worry about that—unless you mean to disguise yourself in the garments you describe and wear a mask. And look here, Justine—we're not going to consult any of that sort of people, either.

I couldn't stand any professional doers-good who'd be sure to disapprove of everything we liked. Don't let's have any methods or morals, but let's have lots of manners. Let's treat these people just as we'd treat any one else; I mean no prying about and telling them what to do."

"I'm with you there," declared Justine. "So many people have tried to improve me that I'll certainly never try it on any one else."

"Well—where the need is so great—" said Marcia, laughing.

"Forget it!" Justine inelegantly retorted.

Whereupon the two women put their heads together and discussed ways and means, though having sufficient of the latter facilitated the former. The end of it was a little room rented over a shop in the Italian quarter and furnished not like a school-room, but like a simple sitting room, with the addition of a blackboard, a few extra chairs with the right arm wide enough to serve as a desk, and some extra-size tables. Justine hunted up the old woman who had complained to her of her illiteracy, and asked her help as a favour, which was graciously and volubly accorded. On two afternoons and two nights a week they held their classes.

It was not long before they had discovered a whole new world—a simple, highly-coloured world, with poverty and dirt in it aplenty, but also courtesy,

gaiety, and a very beautiful gratitude for their small efforts.

Their pupils ranged from boys of twelve, who had been taken out of school to become wage-earners for the family, to old Rosa Cristaforo, who owned to seventy-five years and looked a lively thousand and who was devoured with a passionate longing to read the American newspapers.

Presently Marcia and Justine found—with mixed emotions of amusement at their daring, and anxiety that they wouldn't do it right—that they were not only teaching alphabets and first readers and pot-hooks, but also sanitation, personal hygiene, cooking, care of children, sewing, fashion; for, once assured of the sincerity and friendliness of the two "lovely ladees," as they were called, and with a thrifty wish to make the most of what they saw was indubitably a good thing, the settlement took them warmly to its bosom and brought them many problems.

Family quarrels; the matter of a proper dowry when the girl is very, very plain; how to make American sponge cake; what to do for sore eyes; how to collect bad debts; where to invest certain meagre savings—all these and a hundred other similar matters were brought to Marcia and Justine with a childish faith in their ability to help. The two women often found themselves aghast at the

responsibility they had assumed, but by drafting the services of their friends they managed to reach solutions that seemed to satisfy the puzzled ones.

The one thing they did not have to teach their new friends was an appreciation of beauty. They hung photographs of classic Italian art on the walls of their schoolroom and the elders of the settlement hailed them as old friends. They set up a phonograph and the listeners frankly criticized many of the very best records. One aged junk dealer, a poor old creature of rags and wrinkles, proclaimed that the phrasing of a certain Caruso record was all wrong and sang it as he said it should be sung, in a ghostly shadow of what must once have been a beautiful, liquid tenor.

"I was once of the Milan Opera," he said, "but I lose my voice."

What Marcia told Justine at the beginning—that she wanted to be charitable to herself most of all—came partially true for her, for the work demanded so much from her that she had no time to think about herself. Aunt Janey did not approve of it and gloomily predicted that Marcia would bring home some horrible foreign disease which would wipe out the whole household. Curt was lukewarm in his sympathies, having if the truth were told, a little of Aunt Janey's fear, besides a little hidden jealousy of anything that absorbed so much of

Marcia's attention. But outwardly he was helpful and more than usually kind, because he had astutely argued it out that if he weren't, he would inevitably lose ground with Marcia. The greatest encouragement and practical sympathy that Marcia received were from Harleth's mother.

She had come out to the new home on one of her rare visits and went with Marcia, in the afternoon, to the little school, and the sight of old Rosa Cristaforo, labouring over her copybook, engaged her lively sympathies. She took Rosa out and bought her a warm winter coat and shoes and gloves; she would have bought her a hat, but Rosa, preferring her small shawl, would not have it. Her impulsive generosity was so like Harleth's that it gave Marcia a painful pleasure to see it.

"It's perfectly splendid!" declared the older woman when they were at home again. "I wish I could come every week and help you. I'd love it. You're looking so well, Marcia; it agrees with you. Oh, I'm so glad you found something to do. I was afraid—I was afraid you'd never rally, Marcia. That just shows what an old idiot I am; I might have known better."

There was something so touching and so tender in the old lady's eyes that Marcia went over to her and put an affectionate arm around her.

"Mother, how is Harleth coming out of it? How

is he doing? Tell me—it won't hurt me. I want so much to know. Has he been to see you lately?"

Mrs. Crossey returned the caress eagerly.

"Oh, Marcia, it seems incredible, but she—that woman—is pulling Harleth up. He's not drinking half so much. Indeed, he's hardly drinking at all. He looks—he's getting to look like my boy again. I—I can hardly believe my eyes, but it's true. People have been telling me, too, so it's not just my imagination."

"I'm glad," said Marcia. "I'm so glad!"

"He's more serious, though," went on his mother. "He's not so light-hearted. He works harder, I think."

"Mother," asked Marcia, slowly, "do you know—is he going to marry Leila as soon as he can?"

Mrs. Crossey threw up indignant hands.

"Yes!" she exclaimed. "Yes, he told me so. And I said: 'Don't bring her here, for your father and I'll have nothing to do with her.' He didn't even flare up at that, Marcia—as he always used to do if I said anything to cross him. He just sighed. They go everywhere together. Oh—she's a *bad woman*. I hate her. It almost kills me to think that he'll do for her what he wouldn't do for you and me—and we loved him so."

"He isn't doing it for her," answered Marcia, with a little remote smile. "He's doing it for himself—at last."

CHAPTER XXIII

IN THAT flash of divination Marcia had seen truly, yet she had not seen all. Under the spur of unhappiness and a newly awakened and very wholesome shame, Harleth Crossey had abandoned part of his old self, and in every step of this abandonment he had been curiously conscious of Marcia. Marcia had said he was irresponsible; well, he would demonstrate that he could shoulder his responsibilities as well as any one else. Marcia had hated his lack of self-control; and so there was a special gratification in keeping his temper and his appetites alike under rein. Marcia had said he was thoughtless, selfish; he would prove that he was quite otherwise. It was all done with Marcia's standards set clearly in view, for he acknowledged to himself now that she had been just.

With this new development came also—slowly—humility. He said to himself that he blamed her no longer for not being able to endure the things he had done. He could see where he had outraged her love and spoiled their life together with a ruthlessness that now he could only wonder at in bitter

shame. He never thought that she might still care for him; indeed, he did not see how she could. Besides, there was Leila. He had a duty to Leila, very plainly marked out for him, and he had accepted that duty, though it was becoming more and more of a duty each day, and nothing better. But he must marry her. He knew that she expected it and though he had come to gauge her more accurately than before and had learned to discount much of her pathos and to smile at her dramatics, she had made such a profession of companionship and interest and affection for him that he was hopelessly sure she loved him. On the strength of that supposed love he vowed to himself not to be unworthy—again. He took a certain gloomy satisfaction in the assurances of his romantic imagination that he was lacking not in hero-martyr stuff.

Not that he found Leila wholly distasteful. She was too clever for that, and far too good to look at. Her easy and generous yielding to his whims and her constantly—and not at all stupidly—expressed appreciation of himself were agreeable enough. But, with his truer vision, when he permitted himself to use it, she suffered in comparison with Marcia and in spite of himself, kept him wondering whether in marrying her he'd gain anything of what he had before.

He would have been illuminated if he could have

guessed what was taking place in Leila's well-put-on head. She was the most thoroughly surprised and bored woman who ever set herself to play a tiresome rôle and found herself on the stage an interminably long time. She did not like or understand a serious, sensible, sober Harleth Crossey. She had really fancied him when he was reckless and daring, careless of opinion, sure of himself, ready for any challenge. Now she found him very, very dull, but she set her teeth and endured him, cajoled him, played up to him with every art she knew, fixed in her determination to get the marriage over and establish herself as his wife. After that she meant to indulge generously in being herself again, and she looked forward to her release from the present irksome sham as a fat lady looks forward to taking off a tight corset.

In her present status she was well aware that she was under a cloud. The Templeton-Jennings-Percy-Crossey set had never been of the glittering upper crust of New York society. They belonged to the next layer—the solid, wealthy, respectable people who are not much in the public eye, but who have a well-arranged and even elegant social existence. It is a *milieu* where the girls all go to fashionable schools, the boys to the universities; where orderly family life is still maintained and relatives are recognized; where church-going is regular and not incidental; where incomes are sound, and six to eight

servants are the rule of the average establishment; where orchestra chairs and not boxes are most sought after for Opera; and where a certain decorum of appearance and behaviour is considered highly pleasing and even necessary to be well received. Naturally, Leila Templeton fell under the ban of such people as these when her part in the Crossey divorce was generally known.

It was easy to drift, therefore, into a lighter and frothier atmosphere—the women who perpetually frequent hotels, the men who are perpetually leaning over luncheon or tea tables to talk to these women. A certain Mrs. Macoin, an ugly, clever little divorcée, who lived at the Hotel Palais, met Leila at her tailor's several times and made a point of getting acquainted with her. She had a fund of gossip and a smart way of retailing it; also she had leisure and apparently plenty of money. Leila, tired and bored with Harleth, and very much out of everything with her old friends, at first languidly and then more warmly responded to her advances. She said very little about her acquaintance to Harleth, but the two spent a great deal of time together, shopping, going to beauty experts, matinees, and the like. They had known each other for several months when Mrs. Macoin said to Leila casually, one day:

“I know a man who's simply dying to meet you. He's seen you with Mr. Crossey and he admires you

—oh, enormously. He's an awfully amusing sort; suppose I telephone him and tell him to come up to my rooms for tea?"

"Who is he?" asked Leila, uninterestedly.

"I won't tell you unless you say he may come; but he's crazy about you—says you're the most fascinating thing in New York. What's the matter? Are you afraid Mr. Crossey—" She paused, tantalizingly.

Leila coloured at the implication, half expressed.

"Dear me, no," she drawled. "Send for your mysterious stranger by all means."

An hour later a man was announced who, in appearance, was curiously familiar to Leila, and who was met by Mrs. Macoin with a pronouncedly intimate greeting.

"'Lo, Otis," she said, "I deserve a life-saving medal for this. Miss Templeton—Mr. Vail."

"But I'm sure we've met somewhere before?" said Leila, with her most alluring, sidewise-dropped lashes, "haven't we?"

"We've never met before," said Otis Vail. "If we had, I'd have made you remember me long before this. I've seen you—a great many times—and I've stared at you, I'm afraid, but not so much as I've wanted to."

"Oh!" cried Leila, suddenly. "I *do* remember you now! I saw you at dinner once, months ago, and

I asked the man who was with me who you were and he told me your name."

"I am profoundly flattered. I remember that night perfectly. I was hoping that Crossey might ask me to come over and have my coffee with you. But no such luck—not that I blame him for his selfishness."

Dorothy Macoin had sat by listening to this dialogue, her small green-gray eyes sparkling with animation. She did not mind that they ignored her—she adored the sensation of "starting something," she felt that Vail's hunting of Leila was something more than the chance fancy of a man-about-town. She knew all about Harleth Crossey's divorce-to-be and that Leila intended to marry him; she knew, too, that Vail was not the marrying sort, but she had judged Leila as possessed of an insatiable appetite for attention, and—well, Mrs. Macoin was well aware that a woman who is generous with the men she knows never lacks women friends. And Mrs. Macoin meant to keep Leila for a friend; she would be extremely useful after she was married, and established.

It was all very much as she had foreseen. The understanding established between Leila and Vail was instant and favourable, and presently it was tacitly arranged that he was to make a third whenever possible with her and the little grass widow. It turned existence very much livelier for Leila, in as-

much as Vail was expert in finding new ways and places of urban amusement. Mrs. Macoin was never obtrusive and found many opportunities to give Vail a chance for a tête-à-tête with Leila at her apartment. When they went out, Leila would not consent to Dorothy absenting herself. She would use her presence for an excuse if it came to Harleth's ears that she was going about with Vail. She said nothing about it to him herself, for it was too near the time of his release and their proposed marriage for her to create the slightest obstacle. But her friendship with Vail and the Macoin woman improved her spirit and made it easier to play her rôle of gentle sympathy to Harleth, now that she had an adequate outlet for her more natural inclinations.

She found Vail much to her taste. He was "dangerous," "hard to keep in order," she complained to Mrs. Macoin, but what she really liked best in him was his cool impertinence, which was so delightfully near to license. He was a great resource for what Leila called the "interminable wait" before the courts could set Harleth free. But as soon as the end of the "interminable wait" began to approach, Leila drew a little away from her intimacy with Vail and Mrs. Macoin and set herself to the various unpleasant things to be done before her marriage. For instance, there were her parents to be told. With Mrs. Templeton's many absences

from the city and Mr. Templeton's habit of seeing nothing and hearing less, together with Leila's long-established habit of silence about herself to them, they were not expecting any such announcement and neither of them liked it. Leila faced them down sharply.

"What are you going to do about it?" she demanded. "Please, Mother, don't cry—there isn't the slightest need for any tears. It's simply this: Harleth Crossey and Marcia didn't hit it off together and decided to part. Everything's been done quietly and with as much respect for the conventions you so love as is possible in a divorce. There's no scandal, no *cause célèbre*. And, as soon as they're free of each other, Harleth wants to marry me. I shall certainly marry him; I'd be mad not to. He's a man I've known all my life, he's able to give me all the things I've had to forego since we lost our money; I can't understand why you're so distressed. I should think you'd be thankful."

"There's never been a divorce in the family," sobbed Mrs. Templeton.

"We have to begin some time," said Leila, with impatient humour. "Come—don't be so agitated about something you really ought to be glad about. I'm marrying much better than Daphne did, and as soon as I *am* married you'll have all your income for yourselves. Do you think I ought to keep on living

in this horrible, squalid way just because Harleth Crossey is divorced? Do be sensible, Mother."

She did not address her father. Her reference to their present poverty had silenced him—and he had been favourably struck with the thought of having all his remaining income for himself and his wife. Leila was an expense and not a great comfort to her parents at any time. As she said, everyone got divorces nowadays—there was no use being prejudiced against it.

Something of this he expressed to his wife when they were alone, and with such success that Mr. and Mrs. Templeton presented placid and cheerful countenances at the ceremony of marriage which followed no later than a week after the final decree of divorce in the case of Crossey vs. Crossey, and later sent quite an enthusiastic letter to the absent Daphne—absent by Leila's express intention. In her delicate, slanting hand Mrs. Templeton wrote:

DEAREST DAPHNE:

I can hardly believe that Leila is married, but it is true, though I had not the slightest idea that she intended it until a week or so before the ceremony—just after I wrote you last. It seems that Harleth's divorce was granted and settled about a week ago, and he wanted the wedding at once. It was all so strange, and so different from yours. Leila would not hear of a church wedding—not even of a quiet travelling-dress affair in St. Michael's chapel. Nor would she ask our rector to marry them, al-

though he is very broad in such matters. I felt quite dreadfully about that, but there was no use in arguing with her.

Of course you will want to hear the details. The ceremony was at the Palais; Harleth had rented a suite of rooms and it was all very well done. There were charming decorations—quite a bower of flowers, and very tastefully arranged—not too much. Perhaps it was wiser to go to a hotel in this way, but it was something of a shock to me, nevertheless. It seemed really theatrical.

Leila had a very beautiful gown of white cloth and sables and a little sable hat. She looked lovelier than I've ever seen her and was in the highest spirits. He has given her some magnificent jewels—diamonds and emeralds, which she likes better than anything else. She literally demanded a string of pearls for a wedding gift, but for some reason he would not get it. She quite begged him for it, but he didn't yield. It made her furious and she had one of her typical rages, but of course not before Harleth. She has been careful to keep him in a good humour, but she had laid special stress on the pearls because Marcia had a fine string of them and I suppose Leila thought of that. She had a bouquet of white orchids and lilies of the valley and a sable coat to put on when they went away.

We had a delightful little breakfast served in one of the rooms of the suite after the ceremony and they left to go on a motor tour through the Berkshires. Harleth has bought a new car, a French one, big and comfortable.

You are doubtless waiting impatiently for the list of guests. That is the painful part. Harleth's mother and father would not come; it seems they intensely disapprove this second marriage and resent Leila's entrance into the family, which, as you know, is perfectly absurd of them.

The Crosseys, while they are pleasant people and well enough, were never anybody in particular. Of course our relatives came—the Pardees, the Davises, and Cousin Lewis Stearns and his wife. Leila did not ask *any* of her school friends, but she did ask a Mrs. Macoin with whom she has recently struck up a great intimacy. I do not like her at all—she is divorced, heavily painted and, to my mind, conspicuously loud in dress and manner. She lives at the Palais. Of course, on such short notice, it was impossible to invite many people and I believe Harleth wanted it to be as quiet as possible.

Harleth seems to me to have changed a good bit from the harum-scarum boy he used to be, but he is still very good-looking and his access of dignity and gravity does not lessen him in my eyes. He has been wonderfully successful. Leila is to have a house in town and one on Long Island if she wants it. The house at Wellsridge, which he and Marcia lived in, has been shut up ever since she left him and he will not sell it nor live in it again. Quite sentimental for a man, isn't it?

I will not deny that it is gratifying to have both my daughters so well settled from a material standpoint. Ever since your dear father's misfortunes I have felt so keenly the privations of our poverty that I am thankful that you and Leila are to be spared them. You must write to Leila, Daphne, and send her a really handsome gift; possibly a piece of jewellery, for she never has enough jewels. While I know that you have never been specially congenial, you would be very foolish to quarrel with a sister established as Leila now is. I enclose clippings from all the papers.

With dearest love, always,
MOTHER.

From her own angle, Mrs. Templeton had described the wedding very well. She had omitted some things, notably that it was Harleth who would have to pay eventually for the white gown with sables in which Leila was married, as well as for the sable coat and all the rest of the trousseau. Leila had gone to her dressmaker and told her that she was about to marry well, and wanted clothes accordingly—the bills to be paid after the honeymoon. Mrs. Templeton knew this, but as it was something she disliked to think about, she was beautifully oblivious to its existence.

Though she had told of Leila's fit of temper over the string of pearls which Harleth would not buy for her, she said nothing about another and still more violent scene about the house at Wellsridge that he would not open. On her father and mother Leila visited her rage for Harleth's obstinacy. To him she was sweetly acquiescent, but obviously disappointed. She would not risk a quarrel with him before the marriage. Afterward she promised herself a string of pearls that would make those he had bought for Marcia look like a *débutante's*, and she further flattered herself that they would shortly establish themselves in the Wellsridge house for the summer and face down the disapproval of the Wellsridge people. "It's only winning over the men," she told herself, "and that

will be easy, for me. The women will have to follow."

But they would winter in town. She made a pretty concession of that to Harleth, though she would have been sorry to have it otherwise. She had chosen a particularly attractive house in the East Seventies—gray stone with window boxes filled with small, amusing pine and box, trimmed to a quaint formality, and a beautiful iron grille on the entrance door. The whole exterior pleased Leila; it had something of her own noticeable style, she thought. The inside had been put in the hands of a decorator, a devotee of the newest art, with a particular passion for black-and-white marble floors, old Italian furniture, and the more sorrowful mauve shades. He had been permitted to work his will with these various properties and the result, though interesting, in no possible way resembled a home, but rather a stage-setting in the extreme Gordon-Craig period.

A few days before their wedding Leila had insisted that Harleth accompany her to see their future residence, and they went in an early dusk that did not make the house any more cheerful.

"It seems gloomy," Harleth objected, trying to find the mildest possible word of condemnation.

"We'll make it lively enough, though," promised Leila, tucking her hand under his arm.

She was in high spirits and looking very piquant in her animation. She had put on a motor coat of dull blue corduroy with a collar of black fur; its folds suggested with infinite grace the delicate slenderness of her figure. The little tricorne hat she wore gave added poise and line to her sleek head. As they got out of the car at the door of the house, a man and a woman passing had turned involuntarily to look at her, in open admiration, and Harleth saw them. He looked at her, too, and wondered what they admired so much. An utter blank sickness of soul came over him, and he felt a powerful physical revulsion from this marriage that he knew he must go through with. He watched her preening before one of the big mirrors. She'd never be his wife; he knew that. And suddenly he found the word to express her. She would never be anything to him but a mistress—a mistress wearied of before possession.

"Let's go," he said, "I'm tired."

Leila was sweetly solicitous.

"You never used to be tired. I'm afraid you aren't well."

He did not answer that and they went out to the waiting car. The chauffeur had been obliged to run down the block to get out of the way of some passing trucks and they stood on the sidewalk waiting for him to come back. As they were waiting there a

man passed and took off his hat. Harleth glanced after him in surprise.

"Funny!" he said. "I'd have sworn he spoke to you and never saw me. You don't know Otis Vail, do you?"

Leila looked at him warily from under her long lashes. A week ago at this time she had been sitting in Dorothy Macoin's little reception room, with Otis Vail beside her and he had kissed her wrists and begged her to hurry and get this marriage nonsense over and come back to him—for New York would be a desert without her.

"No, I've never met him," she said. "He must have been speaking to you. I've heard Dorothy Macoin talk about him, though. He's quite a friend of hers, I believe."

She told the lie quite coolly and convincingly. "It's just as well to begin right," she said to herself.

CHAPTER XXIV

TO HARLETH CROSSEY this brief wedding trip with Leila seemed a curiously unreal journey in which he had no part save that of an actor walking through a well stage-managed scene, repeating words he was expected to say, without feeling and without interest. His most genuine emotion came from watching Leila's animation and gayety, and noting, with a certain ironic surprise, that they sprang from things he had scarcely heard her mention before.

Leila was, indeed, wildly happy, not only from having at last got what she wanted in the way of money and position, but also that she need no longer make any pretence of wanting anything else. She flung away her pretty deference and consideration of Harleth and gave herself up to exultant self-congratulation for having escaped from the temporary poverty and obscurity she had suffered. She talked with an almost feverish excitement of the things she was going to buy, the entertaining she would do, the people they would invite (and the people they would leave out), her chances for scoring off

successfully some of those fair-weather friends who had dropped her in her lean days, or whether to forgive and forget all her grievances and start her social campaign without grudges.

"It would be wiser, I suppose, but ever so much duller for me," she told Harleth. "I'd like more than anything to pay off every snub and every slight—cleverly, you know, so that they'd feel it and writhe but not be able to do anything. But it might be very foolish—it's all so frightfully mixed. If I'm horrid to some of the women who've been the most hateful to me, I'll antagonize their connections and friends who may be exactly the ones I must keep on good terms with. Of course you know Belle Percy has done nothing but tell the most unkind stories about me everywhere, and make Marcia out a martyred angel. I've got all that prejudice to deal with. It isn't easy."

A painful colour had mounted to Harleth's face at the mention of Marcia.

"I'm sorry that you've got to pay for what was all my fault, Leila. But if people feel the way you say they feel, don't you think you'd better go a little cautiously at this social game you're bent on? I'd no idea you were so wrapped up in this sort of thing. I'd hoped—I'd hoped we might have some sort of a—a real home, you know—and—and get established—another way."

Leila gave a derisive shriek of laughter. With infinite relief she felt that there was no need to pretend now. No need to think of Harleth's wishes at all, unless they coincided with hers, because—in his present mood—he wouldn't risk another marriage smash-up; she was sure of that. He might just as well understand now and here that she meant to be the most admired and photographed and talked-about young matron of the season, and that a whirl of extravagance and gayety was due her.

"Please don't be absurd. Don't you think I have a right to a little pleasure in life after all these horrid long years of waiting and being poor? I didn't know you were keen on the heavy domestic; you never were before. If we were going in for *that*, we'd better have taken a little West Side flat with one maid."

"That's hardly a fair answer. I only think, that for your own sake—if we're not too much in evidence this first year—"

"You're so ridiculously sensitive about your divorce," she said, sharply. "*Why*, I can't imagine, for everyone does it. And it's not at all likely that we'll have any awkward meeting with Marcia."

The reiteration of Marcia's name deepened Harleth's resentment and at the same time there reached through, clearly, to his understanding a more

accurate estimate of Leila. With grim foreboding he thought of the years to come.

"But I've got no one but myself to blame," the happy bridegroom reminded himself. "I wasn't clever enough to see her game. I've never read her aright. What an awful sweat it must have been for her to be always sweet and sympathetic and jolly and defer to my opinion as if she hadn't a thought or an impulse that wasn't centred in me. And all the time with a cast-iron plan as to what she was going to do as soon as she had me where I couldn't get away. Lord! what fools men are who think they know anything about women!"

Second thought counselled him that she probably didn't mean all that she had said—that it was true that she had been having a hard, dull time, and that it was natural that she should want to come back to her old place in the world with more or less of a stir. He further reminded himself that just because he looked at a lot of things differently from the way he used to was no reason to disappoint her hopes and make her miserable. No, Leila must have her fling, and if the pace was too fast he would put on the brakes and let it go at that. He had married her and no matter what happened he must not fail her as he had failed Marcia, though his desires and ambitions were as far from hers as the poles.

But it was impossible not to remember that Marcia

had not talked of social campaigns or laughed at domesticity on that first honeymoon. The memory of her—her shy yet eager tenderness, her lifting smile, her half-yielding, half-withholding endearments—stung him importunately. He looked at Leila, consciously elegant in every finished detail, her eyes vividly alight at the prospect of the future, her lips set in a calculating line, and he had again the feeling that she was not his wife, but an unwanted, exacting mistress. As he glanced at her, she roused herself from her pleasant task of anticipatory social auditing, aware that she had perhaps made a mistake in being quite so frank. It might, in the end, be easier if he were kept in the dark as to her real plans and purposes. Having shown supreme tact so far, a little more of it might be necessary.

“I wonder what you’re thinking about,” she said, caressingly, “to be so silent. And with that ironic smile.”

Harleth, too, was not unaware of the use of language to conceal thought.

“Was I smiling ironically?” he responded, amiably. “Are you sure? I’ve always wondered how those chaps in novels managed it; I never imagined that I could do it. Are you sure it was irony, Leila? Don’t deceive me on such an important matter.”

Leila had nothing to answer this mild raillery. Her sense of humour was not subtle, what there

was of it, and there was not much. She stared a moment, smiled, because she felt that Harleth was trying to be funny, and then offered a suggestion that had been in the back of her head all the time. It was that they should cut short their honeymoon and get back to New York without any more delay. The vibration of the motor, she said, made her tired and nervous, and the weather might change at any moment; it had been glorious so far, so she couldn't complain of it, but she didn't see how it could last. The truth was that she longed to get back to hotels and shops and the Avenue and begin the new and glittering existence she was promising herself. Only she did not mention this. She said that she was as desirous as Harleth to get established and be comfortably at home.

This idea Harleth could welcome with undisguised pleasure. He would be glad to go back, he said, and in silence sang a pæan of thanksgiving at the early prospect of his office and his work. For the first time since the wedding ceremony, they were thoroughly in accord, and in the rearrangement of their journey they found a common and agreeable motive —their first. And since an automobile is far more accommodating than a train when passengers change their minds, there was nothing to do but to give an order and have it headed back.

They returned four days earlier than they had

intended—though their original plan was for no more than ten days—and the sight of New York was beholding an oasis in the desert. Harleth entered his black-and-white-and-mauve domain without seeing it, save as a stop on the joyful way to his office, and he went on down town as a man released from bondage. There was an exhilaration about just sitting down at his desk again, and hearing the routine details of his work. Work was impersonal, absorbing, and therefore doubly kind. It was the consensus of opinion of his staff that Mr. Crossey must have picked a peach this time, he was in such good humour.

Leila, too, was enchanted to be back. She delighted in each smallest detail of the ordered luxury of her new house, but it did not distract her from her more important business. She lost not a moment in sounding out, here and there, among the few friends she could count on, what her chances might be with the more important social guns. Her first move was astute. She sent for her mother, bought her some smart frocks and some new furs, and started her out in the limousine to call on old acquaintances and renew old ties. It was a part that delighted Mrs. Templeton, and she did it well.

Some of these old friends she brought to luncheon, informally at the new house, and Leila always appeared, a gracious hostess with a display of pretty,

daughterly affection. This sort of thing went exceedingly well with a few, but Mrs. Templeton was not a successful fisher for the biggest catch.

Meanwhile Leila had had small warnings, here and there, that a good many people were determined to remember her only to forget her—intentionally. She met Belle Percy and Mathilde Jones on the Avenue one day as she came out of a shop, and both of them failed to see her—with obvious satisfaction.

“Which means,” said Leila to herself, “that Mrs. Renssalaer Jones is going to take her cue from Mathilde and be nasty to me. I must try some other way of getting at her—stupid old thing. I wish I didn’t need her. As for Belle—it’s exactly what I expected from her, but she’s so frightfully *passée* that I hope she *won’t* notice me. A fat old maid isn’t of any real use except for auction, anyway.”

All the same, she was faintly uneasy. A week or so later she met an elderly woman who once had been one of her mother’s closest friends, an opulent matron whose specialty was charity and who, through that convenient medium, was on easy terms with every one in the city worth knowing. Mrs. Templeton, at Leila’s behest, had tried to renew her friendship with Mrs. Naudain, but had been told that she was still abroad. Evidently she had just returned and Leila grasped her chance greedily.

“My dear Mrs. Naudain,” she said, with her

sweetest manner, "how very nice to see you! How glad Mother will be. She's staying with me, you know, and she was speaking of you only the other day and hoping she would see you before she went out to Daphne again. Won't you—won't you let me take you home with me for luncheon—or——"

She never finished the sentence. Mrs. Naudain had given Leila's cordially outstretched hand a chilly sort of shake.

"Ah, yes—Leila Templeton," she observed. "Very pleasant to see you, I'm sure."

And with that she turned away and stepped into her waiting car, leaving Leila's invitation and her mother alike unnoticed.

The slight was so open and so flat that Leila caught her breath and crimsoned violently. When she had gathered her wits, she remembered that Mrs. Naudain had also been a close friend of the elder Mrs. Crossey. That explained the snub, but it did not lessen the shock of it. Mrs. Templeton had a particularly disagreeable time of it at luncheon that day.

But this was the most unkind cut that Leila received and plenty of people were quite willing to welcome the new Mrs. Harleth Crossey at her own valuation. There was just enough cold shouldering and just enough indifference to make Leila realize that she could not give large parties and get very

much effect with them, for the people she wanted would not come to her in sufficient numbers to make it worth her while.

After almost prayerful meditation, she determined to give a series of small dinners, each of them eventful. She would ask each time a certain number of the "most desirables" and fill up with lesser lights and a few of the gayer set—though she had determined to discard most of these. She had not given up her intimacy with Dorothy Macoin, nor her clandestine flirtation with Otis Vail, and though there was less opportunity, there was even more warmth in it. Yet she had, at times, an unpleasant conviction that Dorothy had connived at her acquaintance with Vail in order to have a hold on her (Leila's) notice. Once when Leila had spoken freely to Dorothy about her plans and aspirations, there had been a look in Dorothy's greenish eyes. She had said nothing; but the look had been a warning.

Not that Leila really wanted to throw Dorothy aside. Dorothy was clever and contriving and made suggestions that Leila was not slow to use. Also she was convenient. She did not mind being put off for another engagement and she did not mind being asked at the last minute if Leila needed her. She had, besides, a keen bargaining instinct and Leila, after her first orgy of spending, developed an unusual thrift along certain lines, which Dorothy fostered

and assisted. Dorothy was amusing, too, and always ready with the latest scandal, stage gossip, and the idle, mischievous backwash of talk that flows through beauty parlours, hotel corridors, and fashionable dressmakers' establishments. Leila had a taste for this talk.

CHAPTER XXV

IT WAS well into the winter season before Leila felt that she was sufficiently established to begin the series of little dinners with which she meant to conquer. It was not until she had practically determined on every detail that she took the trouble to tell Harleth anything about it.

"I'm sure I can manage it, now," she said, triumphantly, as she explained her plan to him. "We'll have some very unusual entertainment after each dinner, something that will give people a thrill —something they won't dare miss."

"For instance?—" asked Harleth, who had listened patiently and without any minor objections. Why shouldn't she give dinners if she wanted to? It seemed innocuous.

"For the first, those new *apache* dancers," said Leila. "'They're positively startling and everyone's crazy about them. Then, for the next, that Australian cowboy, who does things with his lariat and monologues all the while, and the very cleverest vaudeville singer I can get, or that French woman who's singing at Fysher's. For the third, I'm going to

have either one of those weird mind-readers—people simply dote on them, you know—or a boxing match!"

"What? A boxing match!"

"Yes," said Leila, positively. "It's really the newest thing to have boxing. They've been doing it in Paris. Dorothy Macoin says that she went to a regular prize-fight at the home of a duchess there, once."

"Interesting, if true," commented Harleth, dryly. He had never liked Dorothy. "Cut out the boxing, Leila. It's all right for an athletic club, but it's not a desirable after-dinner entertainment."

"How absurd!" exclaimed Leila, with heat. "Heaps of women went to the Jeffries-Johnson fight and one woman wrote quite a long magazine article about it. You're so old-fashioned."

"In this instance I am. But a prize-fight where admission is charged and people go because they want to is slightly different from asking one's friends in to dinner and a prize-fight. This isn't ancient Rome, you know. However—don't let's worry about that now. Let me see who's invited for the first dinner."

Leila had not anticipated this inquiry and she reluctantly handed him the list. He looked it over and gave a low whistle of surprise.

"Here—what's Otis Vail doing here?" he asked. "I thought you didn't know him."

"I've only just met him," fenced Leila, with disarming frankness, "but he's a great friend of Dorothy's and I knew you knew him, too, so I thought he'd do to fill in. I really needed another man and I couldn't think of any one and Dorothy suggested him."

Harleth threw the list down in disgust.

"Is this your dinner, or is it Dorothy's?" he asked, acridly. "You talk about your social ambitions, Leila, and of how you are making an enormous effort to get back in your old crowd; well, you'll never do it if you have Otis Vail hanging round the house. Everybody knows what sort of a man he is. I've known him in a business way for years. Have you sent his invitation?"

"Why, yes; and he's accepted. He seems a harmless-enough sort of person. You're so funny, you men. You pretend to be good friends and are pleasant when you meet, and all that; and yet, underneath, you have the bitterest prejudice against one another. You're really more hypocritical about things like that than women."

With an effort Harleth controlled his temper.

"Can't you tell Mrs. Macoin that I don't like her friend Vail and get her to tip him off to make some excuse and not accept his invitation? It doesn't matter to me at all, you know; I'd just as soon he'd know I don't want him in my house."

"I certainly will not do anything so crude—nor ask Dorothy to do it."

Leila got up to leave the room and terminate the wrangle.

"Well, don't ask him here again," Harleth called after her; but she did not reply.

It was not until the next day when he was frowning over the thought of Otis Vail being invited to his house that it occurred to Harleth Crossey that there had been something reminiscent in Leila's words and manner. At first he could not recall and then it came back to him with a goading exactness that he had answered Marcia in almost the same phrases when he had invited Leila against Marcia's wishes to their long-ago house-warming.

It was not a pleasing memory. He was reminded, also, that it was strange that Leila should have asked this man if she knew him so slightly. And stranger, her glib recital about Dorothy Macoin and her subsequent evasion of discussion. There had been something about it all that had not rung true.

Had Marcia felt like this when he had told her (just as easily as Leila had told him of Vail) that he had met Leila by chance and lunched with her and insisted on her coming to their party? He answered himself with painful honesty that Marcia had undoubtedly been far more deeply concerned, more deeply hurt, because she had cared for him infinitely more than he

could even imagine himself caring for Leila. He dropped his head on his hands. What a lifetime of regrets he had laid up for himself in those few months of recklessness! Oh, Marcia—Marcia!

"I wish she knew," he told himself, savagely, "that I'm paying dearly for it all. I wish she knew that I know how rotten I was to her. I wish she knew that I've come to realize what I lost when I lost her."

He did not press the matter with Leila, but determined to go through with the dinner and then once more forbid her to bring Vail to the house again. He did not foresee that Leila had gone straight to Dorothy Macoin with the story.

"The most absurd thing," she began, finding Dorothy alone in her little rose-and-gray sitting room. "Harleth's flown off at a tangent when he found I'd invited Otis to my dinner. Why *are* men so odd and touchy—about other men, I mean?"

"I think your husband probably has a lot of ideals he wants you to live up to, my dear," drawled Dorothy. "Most husbands have; and they're always ideals they don't want to live up to themselves."

Leila took this statement literally.

"I don't think that Harleth's that kind," she said, humourlessly, "though he's changed a great deal. So long as he was married to Marcia—she was one

of the quiet, sit-by-the-fire sort, you know—there was nothing too wild for him. But the minute she left him!—why, he began to be dull and domestic himself. It's really very odd."

"Interesting psychologically," commented Dorothy, with sarcastic intent. "Perhaps he has a dual personality. Or perhaps you supply the wild element in his life now and he doesn't need to do anything of that sort himself. What did he say about Otis? Maybe someone's been telling him that Otis admires you."

"No; it wasn't that, I'm sure. He didn't speak that way at all. He simply said that he'd known Otis a long time and that he was undesirable, and that he was not to be asked again. And he suggested that I ask you to tell Otis to decline the invitation this time."

"I never was suited to the part of cat's paw. You'll have to tell him yourself—if he's told. Poor Otis. I wonder why he's in Mr. Crossey's bad books?"

"I don't know. I'm certainly not going to say anything to him. How can I?"

"Indeed, how can you?" echoed Dorothy. "But if you want to you'll have an opportunity, for I telephoned him that you were coming." She gave her sly smile. "Isn't it fortunate that I have an engagement out for tea?"

This was what Leila had expected, but she did not say so. By the time Dorothy had gone and Vail had come she had almost changed her mind about telling him of Harleth's hostility to him. She felt intuitively that it would please and pique Vail to know of it; and she wanted to pique and please Vail. He supplied the flavour of intrigue in her present correct existence.

"I wonder," she said to him, after they had talked a little, "whether we're not seeing each other more often than is quite safe? I'm—afraid."

"My dear child," said Vail, coming solicitously near, "what on earth is there for you to be afraid of? You and I are the merest friends—and we see each other very little. Not often enough to suit me, at least. We're never out together except with Dorothy. What is all this?—a preamble to kicking me downstairs?"

"You know it's not that."

"Then what are you afraid of?" reiterated Vail, lazily, enjoying her confusion.

Leila knew that she had been caught, and that she must get the situation in hand again. No explanation about Harleth disapproving him as a dinner guest would serve. He had been too quick for her. She looked up at him earnestly, appealingly.

"I'm afraid," she half whispered, putting out a protesting hand, "I'm afraid—of *myself*."

It was stage-stuff, but convincingly done, and for a moment it shook Otis Vail.

"Don't—don't say things like that, Leila," he said, thickly. "You'll drive me off my head. I can't stand a great deal more of this fooling. You're—you're too dangerous for me."

He jumped up and walked the length of the little room and back again.

"I've seen women like you before. You—you like to get a man where he can feel your power, but you don't lose hold of yourself for an instant. You—you don't care a thing about me—and for six months I've been just letting you walk on my heart. I had the hell of seeing you go and get married to another man who doesn't half appreciate you—he can't, or he'd take better care of you—and now you—you tell me—— Listen!" (he dropped down suddenly beside her) "was that—was that—true?"

Leila flung up both hands to ward him off.

"Don't! Don't! You mustn't! I mustn't listen to you!"

"I'm past all that," said Vail. "You'll have to listen to me."

"No—no. Wait. I think Dorothy's coming in."

They moved apart. It was true; Dorothy was coming in and she surveyed her two somewhat agitated guests with knowing eyes

"You'll have to run along, Otis," she said, smoothly.

"I want to talk to Leila about frocks and I've an early engagement for dinner. You don't mind, do you?"

As soon as he had gone, she turned to Leila.

"I thought it better to get rid of him, the way he looked. What was he saying? Did you tell him about the dinner?"

"I tried to," said Leila, "but before I could—Do you know, he's really very—difficult. He—he almost frightened me. I was glad you came in. He had quite lost control of himself."

"Otis Vail's specialty is losing control of himself," said Dorothy with a laugh. "That's the way he makes love. He's found it very successful, but I didn't think he'd take *you* in. Couldn't you tell that it was all pretense? Oh, you needn't look so furious; I know what I'm talking about."

Leila bit her lip.

"In any case, it's not particularly pleasant to experience," she said shortly, and took her leave without further discussion.

"Dorothy's a cat," she said to herself as she walked swiftly home. "What she said about Otis Vail is not true. I'm no silly little flapper to know nothing about men. He lost his head there for a minute—completely." And before she could check it the unbidden thought came swiftly and with certainty: "*And so did I!*"

CHAPTER XXVI

LEILA had been perfectly right, and Dorothy Macoin mistaken, in their several surmises as to whether Vail had lost his head for that tense moment in the little hotel sitting room. He had—but not intentionally.

Otis Vail had two occupations in life: banking, and the pursuit of women—one for business hours and the other for the remainder of his day. He was fairly successful in both, and because of the same quality—a highly developed, somewhat unscrupulous sharpness that kept the letter if not the ethics of the law. He dealt with women exactly as he did with negotiable paper—studied them minutely and drove as hard a bargain as possible in which the profit went to himself. He had no fancy for poor stuff. He did not loan the bank's money on any enterprise that was not gilt-edged, and his fancy for women led him unerringly to those who had beauty and style and dress to do him credit. He had no taste for shabby little stenographers and underpaid clerks, no matter how blue their eyes or how pink their cheeks. He was wholly uninterested in the butterflies of the

chorus, and, though he knew a few women of the stage, they were those who had gained notoriety of one sort or another and were easily recognizable by the general public off the stage. He didn't want to be seen with any stage beauty unless heads were turned and her name whispered freely as she passed.

The type of woman he particularly fancied was the restless young matron with plenty of money and plenty of leisure and very little interest in or affection for her husband. Such women made delightful companions. They were eager for excitement and distraction; they were sophisticated—and his palate did not relish innocence or naïveté; they liked being made love to; and, most important of all, they couldn't marry him. He had a deadly fear of marriage.

He enjoyed the necessary intrigue and furtiveness of his amours, knowing well that any ensuing scandal would be more costly to the woman than to himself, and he had brought the art of conducting these affairs to something like perfection. Naturally a man with tastes like this carries the flavour of them, and cleaner men instinctively fight shy of him.

He had always been sure that no woman could entangle him or lead him into any rash impulsiveness, but he admitted to himself when he left Leila Crossey that for once he had been as near as possible to throwing caution to the winds, and that only Dorothy's entrance had saved him. He was not

sure whether or not he was glad to have been saved what he knew was a piece of utter folly. And this time his comprehension of women failed him, for he had a profound conviction that if Dorothy had not come in, and he had had his chance to say all the things he wanted to say (yet had not meant to say) to Leila, she would have laughed at him.

From the first time Vail had seen Leila he had admired and wanted to know her, recognizing in her a kindred spirit, but he had not suspected that she might be even more skilled than he in his own particular sort of social piracy. When through Dorothy Macoin he had at last manœuvred a meeting and learned that she was going to be married, he had entered with zest on his usual campaign. To his surprise and chagrin, he found that when the marriage actually occurred he was troubled and angry that she should belong to another. His consolation lay in the indifference which he believed she felt toward Harleth Crossey. Here he had guessed right, but was wrong when he flattered himself that this indifference was something on his own account.

On her return from her honeymoon he had sought her with more ardour than before and knew that she welcomed him. Meantime, the cool experience of him warned him that Leila was as selfish and hard and as old a hand as he at the game they were playing; but this warning deepened his interest and his

purpose. He felt that he was willing for once to waive his security, to lose his ease of mind, to put something more into this one of his "little affairs" than the mere need to be safely amused and entertained. He acknowledged to himself that Leila "had him going."

But now, leaving her and telling himself that she'd drawn him on a deal further than he had intended to go, his habitual caution reasserted itself. He wanted time to cool, and he had sense enough to take it. He did not seek her or try to see her again until the night of her dinner.

He had counted that dinner invitation as a special privilege, and yet as a sign of Leila's daring, for most of the women with whom he had carried on similar flirtations had never permitted him the entry of their homes in a conventional way, under their husbands' very eyes. That Leila should do so argued either that she was more indifferent to Harleth Crossey than he had hoped, or, if not that, that she was more defiant of convention. Either surmise raised her value in his eyes. He wanted, too, to see her with her husband and judge for himself what they were to each other.

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Leila had prefaced her dinner by another demand on Harleth for an adequate string of pearls. "It's simply not decent to have no pearls," she had

said. "There's no other jewel that takes the place of them. I don't see why you won't buy some for me. I'm in two minds to go to Tiffany and get a string and have it charged to you."

Harleth had evaded her. "You have quantities of other stuff," he had said, "and pearls don't suit you half so well as stones with a lot of life and colour."

"That's not the reason at all," she said as she faced him angrily. "I don't see why you're so beastly obstinate about this one thing. You gave Marcia a beautiful string."

Although Harleth had schooled himself to show no outward sign of the inward flinching which he felt at Leila's mention of Marcia, he felt it none the less. "Perhaps that's the reason I won't get one for you," he had said, shortly. "And it won't be worth your while to try to go to Tiffany—or anywhere else. They'd never let a thing as valuable as that go out of the store without knowing that the purchase was O. K'd by me."

Leila had stamped her foot and flown into a rage, but he had remained imperturbable. At last she had given it up, but the struggle had left her wrathfully indignant and looking for some adequate means to express her resentment.

"At any rate," she said to herself, looking into the mirror while the maid did her hair, "I don't need any rouge. I haven't had so much colour for ages."

She was to wear a black gown for her début as hostess, a film of black tulle with a sheath of black satin beneath. There were narrow bands of black sequins to weight the net and to lie along the décolletage and make her white skin still whiter. The beauty lay in the clear and curving line of the gown emphasizing Leila's slender suppleness. There was a winglike drapery of tulle from each shoulder that pretended to be a sleeve and gave delicate airiness as she moved, showing her bare and beautiful arms to the shoulder. But her reflection did not give Leila any great satisfaction.

"A string of pearls would have made it magnificent," she said to her maid, "but I suppose I shall have to wear these."

"These" were the diamonds and emeralds that she had received with so much rapture on her wedding day. After they were on, Leila became a little less gloomy. But it still lurked in her mind that she had a score to settle with Harleth, and when she went to meet her guests she was agreeably conscious that in Otis Vail a means of punishment was at hand.

Vail had not come early, nor had he come late. He and Mrs. Macoin had achieved a fairly inconspicuous entrance, amongst some others. But Leila promptly singled him out by the warmth of her greeting, and the curt nod and forced handshake that Harleth offered him were noticeable by contrast.

If Harleth could have known how greatly his lack of courtesy pleased Vail, who thought it came from active jealousy, he would have met him with open arms.

Harleth's mood gave Leila her cue for greater efforts to provoke him. Dinner was served at small tables and Vail was placed at Leila's. Harleth was given a dowager and a complement of the dullest members of the company, but he was peacefully content amongst them—or might have been but for the high jinks that went on at his wife's table. He shrugged his shoulders at the din and turned his attention stoically to making his dowager happy, and as she was a jolly old lady, a Mrs. Gavit, whom he had known for years, it was not difficult. She told everyone afterward that Harleth Crossey was just the same dear boy he had always been but that he had *absolutely* reformed, hardly touched a drop of anything, and therefore there must be *something* good about Leila, no matter what people said about her!

For her dinner Leila had reproduced as faithfully as possible the interior of a celebrated French restaurant; that, too, had been Dorothy Macoin's suggestion. She had used two rooms and provided a series of diversions while the guests ate: A trio of gypsy singers; a girl flower-seller who gave away instead of selling her bouquets; a most amusing,

rascally performing dog, and his master made up as a tramp; two Moorish tumbling boys, a street fakir with clever patter and odd favours—all these threaded their way among the tables and offered their gifts or their entertainment, prolonging the service far beyond the usual time. Through it all Harleth was conscious, with growing annoyance, of Otis Vail at his wife's side, leaning to her, talking to her in swift, bold asides, his eyes always greedily fixed on her, and of Leila's pleased response. Once or twice Harleth answered the dowager at random—but she did not notice. She was watching the performing dog and laughing at his tricks and the waggish black patch over his left eye.

When the dinner was almost over, servants entered and unobtrusively shifted some of the tables so that a space between the two rooms was opened. A horn was blown, a piercing, impudent note, and with it the *apache* dancers burst into the cleared space and stood there, posed, motionless. Music began—shrill, insistent—with a wild, uneven rhythm, and the dancing began.

The two *apaches*, a man and a woman, had created a distinct sensation when they had produced this dance in the latest revue, and it was more effective, more arresting here, danced so close that one could see their faces well—his, degraded, lowering; hers, abandoned to wild voluptuousness. Her black hair

was short and flying, her tight blouse strained over her breast, and she flung herself about with a sort of frantic madness, giving now and then a short, shrill cry like the scream of an animal.

Harleth watched them for a while and looked away. He glanced about him and saw his guests, for the most part, hanging on each sensational gesture of the dancers with obvious delight. As he looked, he became aware that Leila and Vail had slipped away and that Dorothy Macoin was watching him. He sat stolidly in his place and turned his eyes again to the dancers. The people at his table were saying enthusiastically what a clever idea it was to have the *apaches* and how they had seen these very same people in Paris at a café there, and how wonderful it was, and didn't the man look like a real desperado?—and to all of these remarks Harleth Crossey made more or less mechanical answer. He felt tired, bored, and disgusted with the whole thing—the dinner, the people, the dancers, and Leila. He wondered whether she had arranged this particular sort of entertainment so that she could slip away for a confidential tête-à-tête with Vail, but he did not suspect anything more than that. Why couldn't she manage to see the fellow less noticeably, he thought, with irritation.

After the *apaches* had done their programme of dances, and the guests were going, he was conscious

of a sick moment of anxiety as to whether or not Leila had returned. But presently he saw her, in the highest spirits, and when the last guests had disappeared she turned to him exultantly:

"It went!" she said. "It went! People will be crazy to come to my dinners after this. Not much like the usual, formal bored-to-death affair, was it? Weren't the dancers a thrill?"

He did not answer, so she walked over to him.

"What's the matter? Are you peeved because I put you down with the Gavits and the Demorestes and Mattie Poindexter? I only did it because I knew you were the one person in the world who could make them have a good time. It *was* dull for you, I'm afraid."

Harleth sighed.

"Look here, Leila," he began, good-humouredly, "we'll have to have a show-down on this Vail person. I guess I'll have to put it into words of one syllable. You don't at all realize what sort of a man he is. You know with most chaps there's a sort of dead-line—a dead-line of decency, you might call it; things they won't do, things they won't say, things they won't stand for. They've got a distinct limit, and everybody knows it without their saying so. But Otis Vail is one of the kind who hasn't any deadline. He's a confirmed woman-chaser and he talks about the women he knows to anybody he can get to

listen. Now, can't you see why I don't want you to have anything to do with him?"

Leila looked at him amusedly.

"My dear Harleth," she began, in her most exasperating tone, "what could he possibly say about me?"

"He might say, with truth," answered Harleth, in very much the same manner as his wife's, "that you had literally thrown yourself at his head when he was in your house, and that you had permitted a great deal of familiarity in word and manner from him before a roomful of interested spectators, among whom was your husband, and that you had absented yourself with him from the rest of your guests for —well, for what? You might answer that question."

From under her lowered lids Leila turned on him a sparkling gaze.

"How droll you are. You saw nothing at all in slipping away with me for a joy-ride at the big, stupid party Marcia gave in Wellsridge, Harleth, and we didn't get back in time for you even to say good-bye to your guests. Now I didn't leave you in any such dilemma. I returned before any one but you had missed me, and said good-bye sweetly to everyone."

"Just because I made a fool of myself once," said Harleth, "is no reason why you should do it, too. Perhaps I would like to save you from my mistakes.

But we seem to be getting away from Vail. Don't bring him into this house again unless you want to have me put him out. And if you're wise, you'll drop his acquaintance altogether. He'll only be a drawback to your ambitions. He can't possibly help you socially. Don't be foolish. You've evidently taken a fancy to the man and, I assure you, I'm not jealous. I know him well enough to be sure that his friendship can't be anything but a loss to you, any way you look at it. Come, now, as a matter of self-preservation—why not drop him?"

"Do you think I can't take care of myself?" asked Leila, sulkily.

"I know you can't take care of yourself with an unscrupulous cad like Vail," said Harleth. "It made me sick to see him sitting beside you to-night and staring down at your shoulders. Pretty raw stuff. Look here; you've given your first dinner, and it's gone off with a bang, and you're on the high road to what you've been saying you want—which is to put all your old friends in their proper places again. Why can't you be content with that and not let Vail butt in and spoil it all for you?"

Leila looked at him strangely and burst into a trill of laughter.

"You're really rather nice, old dear," she said, in a softened voice. "Thanks for the lecture and for not beating me. I know I deserve it." And she

ran upstairs, her black tulle wings flying behind her in airy inconsequence.

She laughed again when she had gained her own room—laughed at what an old fogey Harleth had gotten to be—at his solemn warnings against Otis Vail; and a little at the ardent things Vail had said to her in the brief half hour they had snatched together while the *apaches* danced. And then she shivered a little, too. He *had* been in earnest; Dorothy Macoin wouldn't call this pretense.

But she resolved to be more careful.

She did not say anything more about Vail to Harleth and they went their ways as usual through the round of the winter's engagements. Leila's other dinners had been as successful as her first, and she had had more invitations than she could possibly accept. Harleth, seeing her apparent acquiescence in his decision against Vail, put the matter far back in his mind and tried to lose it. Even though she had yielded, the thing left a stain in his memory.

Winter waned and early spring appeared. English daisies, round and pink-tipped, and white-and-lavender pansies took the place of the prim little box trees in the Crossey window boxes, and tried to pretend that the sunshine was so warm that they did not mind the March winds.

Harleth Crossey, hurrying uptown in a taxi, much earlier in the afternoon than was his wont—for he had been summoned to see a certain big financier who transacted business in the library of his great Fifth Avenue house only—thought impatiently that winter had been longer than he ever remembered before and that spring bade fair to be as wearisome. The old joke of married men living longer than single—no, it only seems longer—came to his mind and he felt the philosophic force of the humour. If half a year of marriage with Leila seemed to him like ten years, what was a life sentence going to be?

What did other men do who had married the wrong woman, he wondered, to endure it—laying aside the cheap and doubtful consolation of seeking solace elsewhere. He had made a double mistake. He had married the right woman and thrown her away for the wrong one. Then, in a sustained mood of doing his duty because it was his duty, he had married the wrong one and made up his mind to see it through. And at the end of six months he was distrustful of the motives he had thought so fine and loathed the obligations he had incurred. A lifetime of Leila—a lifetime of theatre-parties, dinners, receptions, dances, restaurants, resorts, and the attendant bills for all of it. Slaving away downtown to make money for her to spend. Suddenly he thought of his little son, his and Marcia's. *He*,

should have some of that money—he'd see his lawyers to-morrow and arrange it. It had been so long since the child had been in his thoughts that he could hardly recall how old he was. He counted it up laboriously—why, he must be nearly five years old.

Five years old—almost at school age. Harleth wondered a little wistfully who the boy looked like, and what he knew about him, his father. Would Marcia, he questioned, let him go to his grandmother's for a little visit. If she would, he might go to see him, talk to him. He wanted inexpressibly someone who really belonged to him for comfort in his dire loneliness. Well, he would ask his mother to approach Marcia and arrange it, if she could. She had been very stiff with him since his second marriage, but surely she would do this. How he had disappointed her! Looking at it in all retrospect he could see no one who had benefited but Leila. She had got what she wanted. She was happy. Since that one time when he had spoken his mind about Otis Vail, they had led an ostensibly harmonious life. She was living up to her bargain, at least, and he suddenly condemned himself again for finding it so hard to endure his part of it.

At Forty-fourth Street his cab got into a crush of traffic and they could only creep along the Avenue. Moved as though someone had called to him to look,

Harleth sharply turned his head and saw, in the last window of Delmonico's, a man and a woman leaning toward each other absorbedly over the table. He knew perfectly that smile, that level glance, the lustre of the smooth, dark hair under the tilted hat.

And facing Leila, with his face very near to hers, and his eyes intimately answering hers, was—Otis Vail.

Harleth Crossey leaned back in the cab so that they would not see him. "Oh, damn!" he murmured. "Not even that."

CHAPTER XXVII

TEA at Delmonico's was the result of a realization on Vail's part that Dorothy Macoin was far too ubiquitous. He wanted to see Leila alone and uninterrupted, and even a restaurant was better than Dorothy's little sitting room with the consciousness that Dorothy would come in at any moment—and she had a genius for choosing the disconcerting one. He was sure she did it by intention.

Matters had not progressed over-well for Vail. He had not been invited again to Leila's house, though he sometimes called there at times when she indicated that it was possible. But there might be other callers—there frequently were; and more trying still, these calls of his were of necessity rare, because Leila herself was constantly going out. Vail complained feelingly of all these things, and Leila listened to him with her vanity purring.

"You put me off and you put me off," he said. "I never see you. You almost never go to Dorothy's any more."

"But I thought," she began—and stopped.

"You're right," he told her, "Dorothy isn't exactly satisfactory." He went on, impulsively: "She's a little blackmailer, that woman. Oh, don't look so alarmed. I'm not speaking literally, though it's the truth that she blackmailed Macoin into marrying her and then made him give up a hundred and fifty thousand to get shut of her. And knocked his political ambitions into a cocked hat for good measure. But she wouldn't try anything of that sort with you. If she does, you've only to let me know. I'll take care of it."

"I know you would," she said, sweetly, "but I think you exaggerate. No one could be really afraid of poor little Dorothy."

"Don't get the idea that she's any poor little Dorothy person," said Vail. "She's a very smart, unscrupulous woman. But I don't intend to waste my precious time with you by talking about her. When are you going to let me come to see you again? It's been nearly three weeks; it seems like three separate eternities."

"You know how Harleth feels about you," hesitated Leila. Harleth's dislike to him at times was a great convenience.

"Has he said anything lately?"

"Oh, no; but then—he doesn't know I see you."

Their eyes met across the table and they smiled with perfect comprehension.

"You may just as well tell me," said Vail, lowering his voice. "This marriage of yours bores you enormously, doesn't it?"

"Dorothy tells me that's what you ask every married woman."

"It's a perfectly good question, isn't it?"

"I suppose so. Doesn't it bore you horribly, being unmarried?"

"If," said Vail, watching her closely, "if I had found a woman like you, I'd have married long ago. You're the sort I need."

"You mean that I'd never let you feel too sure of me?" Leila was indeed enjoying herself.

"And would you always feel sure of me?"

"Oh, I'd never feel sure of you; that's why it's much better for me to play with you only now and then."

"I know you're only playing with me," he said. "You don't need to tell me that. But look here, honestly—if it's only play, and nothing more to you—why don't you say to me: 'This thing isn't safe—and it's bad for you and none too good for me; we've got to say good-bye. Why don't you say that to me, Leila?'"

He had leaned across the table and his eyes implored her. In spite of herself, she could not help but feel an answering earnestness—a very little.

"Do you want me to say that to you?"

"You're hedging. Answer me, won't you? You

know that I've been head over heels in love with you from the first time I saw you, and that I'd do anything—anything."

"But what can you do?" she pulled him—and herself—up sharply.

For a few minutes he did not answer. Then he had veered.

"I wonder how you ever came to marry Crossey, anyway," he said, as calmly as he had been excited before. "Of course I know the story everyone told at the time—that you were his wife's dearest friend and went into their home and literally snatched him away from her. I know you're quite capable of it. You're the sort who takes what she wants, no matter who rightfully owns it."

Leila turned an indignant scarlet.

"You're insulting. I'm going." She picked up her gloves and little jewelled purse.

But he put out a detaining hand.

"Oh, no, you're not. Don't be so easily teased. There's nothing to be angry about. By George, you're perfectly stunning when you're angry. My dear girl, I wasn't saying anything derogatory to you. If you wanted Harleth Crossey it was a magnificent thing for you to do, to take him, and I admire you for your nerve. You're like Cleopatra, who had the slaves murdered who brought bad tidings, or like that mediæval Italian princess who poisoned any one

she happened to dislike. You've got your own ideas of life and what you want to get out of it, and you go ahead and get it. I never knew a woman who had such courage and strength as you. It's superb in its honesty."

"You're more frank than usual," said Leila. "I didn't know you thought me a combination Cleopatra-Borgia. It's not very—flattering."

"But do I need to flatter you? You know I don't. Leila—tell me, do I mean nothing at all to you? Suppose—just suppose—that you were free from Crossey——"

"But I'm not."

"Perhaps you think I don't know that. Turn your head a little—that way. You have the most fascinating eyelashes I ever saw; perhaps *you* don't know *that*. I wonder—are'n't you ever going to be more kind to me? Don't you think I deserve a little better treatment? Doesn't my devotion count with you at all?"

Again came that heart-shaking earnestness in his voice, and again Leila felt that same strange unwillingness to play with him and put him off.

"But what can I do?" she asked, slowly.

He was quick to seize the advantage.

"Only see me oftener—that's all I ask. Make an opportunity now and then; don't leave it all to chance. Is that so very much for me to hope for?"

"But if Harleth——"

"You don't really care what Harleth says—even though you pretend to; now, do you? And what can he say? This isn't the last century; women are allowed a little personal liberty, even married ones. Do you have to have special permission from your husband whenever you want to speak to another man? You—with your pride and your spirit? But we can be very careful that Harleth shan't know—too much, if that makes it easier for you. It's you, and your comfort and your peace of mind that I'm thinking of—always. Won't you let me see you more often? Leila——"

Leila considered—her eyes half shut. In all the months she had known Vail he had not been so genuinely ardent, so convincing. It was absurd, as he said, for Harleth to play the tyrant. She wouldn't risk anything; every woman had men friends—so long as she was careful. She did not quite admit it, but she could not have refused; no, not if there had been a risk—a big risk. There was something about him that compelled her.

"You know," she began, "*Dorothy was* convenient. If you think you could make her a little more possible——"

It was acquiescence, and Vail knew it.

'I can manage Dorothy perfectly,' he said, exultantly. "She merely wants to be paid. I've

only wanted to know that you—you see, I wasn't sure how you felt about her. It is so much to her interest to have you for a friend—oh, she knows that. At any rate, she'll do for the time. Perhaps later——” he paused, then went on: “If you only knew how happy it makes me to know that I'll see you more often, Leila. I wish I thought that it gave you a thousandth part as much happiness. You—you mean so much to me.”

He was in dreadful earnest now, holding himself in check with an effort—there was no doubting it. He waved the waiter away and laid her furs across her shoulders, managing to touch, ever so lightly, her neck with his fingers—a warm, electric little touch.

“I'll take you to the door and put you in a cab,” he said, as they went out, “I know you'd rather not be seen with me here. You were very good to give me this half hour. And I'll see you soon again—very soon. I'll arrange it with Dorothy.”

Leila settled back in the cab contentedly. It was going to be agreeable to go on with her friendship with him, especially in the little time when social life slackens before she must make plans to go out of town. Harleth's prejudice against him was silly, probably based on nothing at all. Yes, it was going to be very agreeable. She smiled softly to herself.

CHAPTER XXVIII

IT'S no use arguing with myself," said Marcia, plaintively to Justine Burd, "I'm so sick of that Italian school, I can't bear another whiff of garlic. I feel like a criminal when I go down there and they all beam at me as if I were an angel from heaven, and I am literally hating them all. Oh, how glad and thankful I'll be when we leave for the summer. I'm going two weeks earlier, just to get away from it. Are you shocked, Justine, to find out what poor stuff I'm made of?—unless you suspected it before?"

A little straight wrinkle came between Justine Burd's even brows. "No, I'm not shocked, of course," she said. "I get horribly fed up with the place myself sometimes, but I wouldn't say anything. And, as you say—they are so grateful and so friendly and so really nice and dear that it makes you ashamed to get tired of them. What's the matter—aren't you feeling well? You're a little pale."

"I'm restless," said Marcia. "I'm so restless I can't endure myself." She got up and walked about her big living room, pushed in a drawer of the old

mahogany lowboy that stood by the dining-room door, straightened a picture that was already straight, and set the pendant crystals of her Colonial light to jingling. Justine Burd watched her understandingly.

"You know," went on Marcia, "this world's a hollow mockery for a woman who doesn't need to work and who isn't anything but the old-fashioned domestic sort. You might tell me to go in for suffrage, or for any one of a lot of big public movements, and forget myself that way. I'll tell you quite frankly, Justine, that I don't care a whoop whether women ever get a vote or not——"

"S-sh," said Justine. "You're talking heresy to the sex."

". . . And I don't care a whoop about any other kind of thing that means clubs and committees and making speeches and 'registering definite protests'—oh, favourite phrase—and meddling into public affairs that I know nothing about. I won't try it."

"Well, of course you have your boy," said Justine, reflectively.

"Yes, I've got my boy—for possibly six or seven years. And then he'll go to school and to college, and then he'll marry and make a life of his own. I can't build my existence entirely on him, Justine. I'd degenerate into one of those vampire mothers

who make themselves and their children so wretchedly unhappy."

"There's something in that," mused Justine. "I don't want to be like a horrid woman that I once heard say she tried always to think of her children as intellectual entities, but I do try to let mine have a little individuality and some rights of their own. But, 'getting back to our muttons'—what do you intend to do? Shall we abandon the school, or hire a teacher for it? Then you could take Boy and Aunt Janey and go travelling for a while. A little change and rest would probably bring you back, glad to smell the garlic again."

"I think I'll stick it out until we go away," said Marcia. "And I do want another summer at the beach for Boy. It does him so much good—I can fairly see him grow down there. And in the autumn, if I'm still unsettled and 'low in my mind,' maybe we could work out something different. A good, competent teacher can do a lot more for our people than we can, anyway, only don't let's get one of those militant souls who would take no interest in their little sorrows and joys. They'd hate her."

"We don't need to choose her at this moment," reminded Justine. "Well, I must run along. I am going to get hold of Dollie Dashiell; she was talking about a book of children's songs in French she saw the other day—all with little pictures—and I thought

I'd get it and let Ma'm'selle try it on my brood. Bye-bye, Marcia."

She went out to her own little runabout and trundled it slowly down the drive. "The truth of the whole business is that Marcia ought to marry again," reflected Justine "and if Curt is ever going to speak up, now is the time. I wonder—I wonder if I ought to say anything to him? I think I'll ask him out for a day or two—and see. It's evident to everybody how he feels about her and though I'm not much for interfering with other people's business—" She pursed up her lips and put on speed. If she telephoned for Curt, he could come out either tomorrow—which was Friday—or certainly on Saturday.

The vague plan she had evolved had meantime been growing more clear to Marcia's mind. After the summer at the beach—yes—she would surely travel. A winter in California—a sea voyage—it wouldn't be difficult to plan something that would be diverting. Perhaps Japan; or—certainly Hawaii! She ran in haste to find Aunt Janey.

That estimable lady was undergoing the final touches on her morning toilet at the hands of Bocock, her capable maid—she seldom appeared downstairs until luncheon.

"How do you like this little foulard Miss Sykes made me?" she asked, turning before the mirror.

Bocock was fastening the simple drapery of the skirt, but cocked a quizzical eyebrow at Marcia. Bocock did not like Miss Sykes, nor her works. She cherished the belief that she could have made better clothes herself; and she was not so far from being right.

"It's very nice," answered Marcia, mechanically.
"Perhaps that collar ought to be——"

"She puckered it sewing it on," announced Bocock, triumphantly. "She didn't cut it right and she tried to hide it by taking up the fulness in the seam."

"Oh, well—it doesn't show," said Miss Janey, complacently. "The general effect is what I want."

Bocock sniffed and said no more, whereupon Marcia plunged into her subject.

"I've been thinking, Aunt Janey," she began, "that after this summer we might close up this house and travel for a while, or go somewhere for the winter—Hawaii, or California, at least."

"Oh, not California," said Miss Janey, disposing of the Golden State as if it were a garden plot. "California's not half what people tell you it is. Frightfully cold at night, even when the days are sultry."

"What about Hawaii, then?" asked Marcia.
"It's warm enough there all the time, isn't it?"

"Do you think there'd be a great deal of that ukulele music?" asked Aunt Janey, plaintively.

"We wouldn't need to listen," said Marcia, "and anyway, the natives play it wonderfully—not a bit like the things you hear in restaurants."

"Well," began Aunt Janey, doubtfully, and Marcia could see that she was meditating other objections, so she broke in hastily:

"I'll send for some of the folders, Aunt Janey, and write to some of the tourist companies, though we won't go with any tour—don't worry about that. Then we can get a better idea of it. And we'll ask some people who've been there. I'll do it right away."

She turned and ran downstairs without further parley. She was afraid that Aunt Janey might find some insuperable reason why she couldn't and wouldn't go to Hawaii, and she didn't mean to give her a chance just then.

CHAPTER XXIX

IT WAS to find her almost submerged by travel "literature" of all sorts—folders showing magnificent steamships with trails of impressive, black smoke sailing over the brightest of blue seas; leaflets decorated with beautiful hula girls; and business-like typewritten letters setting forth varieties of tariff to suit all purses—that Curt Jennings found Marcia on the next Saturday afternoon. He had come eagerly at Justine Burd's bidding and had not missed the subtle implication of her description of Marcia's state of mind.

"Why, Curt!" exclaimed Marcia, as he came in, "how awfully, *awfully* glad I am to see you. It's been a month since you've honoured us. Why didn't you let me know you were coming?"

"I came unexpectedly," said Curt. "Ran out and wished myself on Justine and Dick for the rest of the week-end and as they're both out this afternoon, I came on over here."

"Of course you need a good excuse for coming here," mocked Marcia. "Look at all this stuff—Aunt Janey and Boy and I are thinking of a winter in Hawaii."

"'Winter,' is a long, long way off. Summer precedes it, as usual, I believe."

"We're going to the beach again this summer. But I'm beginning early with Aunt Janey and getting the idea of Hawaii firmly planted in her mind. And I want to think about it, too. I'm frightfully restless and discontented, Curt. I'm trying to plan something to look forward to."

"School all played out?" asked Curt.

"No; it's going on as usual," said Marcia, "but I told Justine at the beginning, and practically repeated it the other day, that I'm not so vitally interested in that sort of thing. I went into that school scheme because I wanted something to take up my time and keep me from thinking about myself. I didn't have any fine altruistic motives—I was just plain selfish about it. It served its purpose to get me by for a while, but now I'm just about as sick of it as I can be. The truth is, I don't know what to do with myself, Curt."

It was then that Curt found himself saying, quite easily and unconcernedly, what for three years and more he had dreamed of saying but had imagined past his power to say without his tongue cleaving to the top of his mouth and his voice failing him. They did neither.

"Look here," he heard himself saying, "why don't you marry me?"

With her hands buried in the mass of gay papers before her, Marcia stared at him in open astonishment.

"Why, Curt!" she exclaimed. "You're not in earnest!"

Curt leaned forward and dug into the papers for one of Marcia's hands, found and held it.

"Yes, I'm in earnest. Haven't you known it? I've had it for so long on the tip of my tongue to say but I've been literally afraid to venture; what is there to look so surprised about? If you knew how long I've cared for you, Marcia—long before you and Harleth ever were married—away back in the time when you first came on from school to stay with Belle and Leila—but, of course, you never noticed me, even then, not seriously. I've always been a fat dub nobody paid any attention to."

"You were in love with me as long ago as that, Curt!" asked Marcia, still dazedly.

"Yes, I was. You ought to remember how I used to hang around you. And, of course, after you married, I knew it wasn't any use. But now—you're free again, and you're lonely, and—I could take you back to Wellsridge amongst all your friends there—— Why, what's the matter! Oh, Lord, I suppose I oughtn't to have said anything about Wellsridge. But we needn't live there, Marcia—I'd live anywhere on God's earth you wanted to. I'd

do everything you wanted. I've loved you so much—and so long—well, if you only knew——”

“Oh, don't, please, Curt,” cried Marcia. “Don't! There isn't any use going on and talking about it. I couldn't marry you. I don't care for anybody but Harleth and, in spite of everything—the divorce, and—and his marrying again—I can't feel that I'm anything but his wife. I—I couldn't be any one else's, I couldn't.”

“But, look here, Marcia,” protested Curt. “He's married again and, from all I hear, he and Leila are hitting it off all right. Somehow—I don't know how—she's made him brace up and stop drinking and walk the straight-and-narrow like a model husband. They've been giving parties all winter and going about together, and though everybody says he's not nearly so lively as he used to be, he seems contented. Well, then—are you going to sit and mope all the rest of your life for a man like that? I know what I'm saying sounds brutal, but I can't help it. You've got to face the truth of it, and not sentimentalize. Harleth left you for Leila; he's got Leila, and he's satisfied with her. Now why and how do you figure it out that you're still his wife? Be honest, Marcia; aren't you deceiving yourself with a lot of sentimental rubbish that isn't real, or even worth while?”

She raised protesting eyes to his.

"Maybe I am; maybe it's only sentiment and foolish sentiment at that. But I can't help it. It's the only thing I believe in and the one thing I cling to. All you say is true, Curt. Harleth left me and he's married Leila and he's content with her. But that can't stop me from loving him, or thinking of him as mine. We had the most beautiful life together; oh, I'm glad I had it, even with what came afterward. Nothing can take that away. And then there's Boy—and he's going to grow up to look like Harleth! Curt, you talk about using common sense, and you tell me that to feel the way I feel is sentimental rubbish; well, then, why didn't you feel the same way about me when I married, if you were in love with me before that? Why didn't *you* go and marry some nice girl and build your life all over again? Why did *you* keep on caring for me and shutting your eyes to everyone else? Was that sentimental rubbish?"

"You've got me there, Marcia," said Curt, sadly. "You're right and I'm wrong, of course. Only I can't bear to see your life wasted, and of course—I want you awfully for myself. Don't you think that maybe, sometime, you'd be able to—to forget about Harleth?"

"Don't you think, sometime, Curt," she paraphrased, gently, "you might be able to forget about me?"

He got to his feet.

"That's my[^] answer," he said. "No, I don't. You're too clever by half, Marcia. Look here, you're not going to let this spoil our being friends, are you—and make me not see you and all that sort of thing?" He pulled his plump face into wrinkles of anxiety.

"No, of course not," said Marcia. "Only—don't say any more about it. I couldn't get along without you, Curt."

"Well, that's something. And thank you for not saying you feel as if I were your brother. I couldn't have stood it."

"Neither could I; and I never thought of saying it—or even thinking it. You're a lot more to me than any relation could be, Curt."

"And, Marcia," he said, lingering, "if you should change your mind, you know—why, I won't."

"I wonder," she said to herself, as she watched him go down toward the street. "Poor old Curt!"

Perhaps, after all, he had been right and she wrong. But she shook her head; no—she was right. It wasn't sentimental rubbish to remember and to love. But, oh, the dreariness of it! The hopelessness! The endless tear of it against one's heart! There were so many times when she felt that she must see Harleth, even if she only stood where he passed and caught the merest unknowing glimpse of him. When

she went to New York she was always looking for him. Once she had thought she saw him coming toward her and she had gone suddenly faint and dizzy—but it was not he. Just a man who was of the same height and build and had something of the lilt of Harleth's walk. Twice she had gone to the downtown building in which his offices were and waited in the jostling crowd of the lobby, hoping that he might come by; and twice she had hurried away in a panic lest he should come—and see her. She remembered all this as she stood watching Curt Jennings go out of her house with her refusal to marry him. Marry him! Marry any one! Never, never, never!

It had unsettled her still more, that talk with Curt, and even the prospect of Hawaii seemed piffling and tiresome. The school was harder work than ever. At last, in desperation, she decided to go down to the house on the beach three weeks earlier than usual, instead of two. She persuaded Justine Burd to go with her and open her own house.

"There'll be no one there," protested Justine, "and it makes the servants grumble so."

"The Inn's open," said Marcia. "We'll get Mr. Broadnax to let the servants use the bowling alley and the pool tables until the place really comes alive. That'll placate them."

"Well, I don't mind," agreed Justine, finally.

She was the more willing because she had guessed what had happened between Curt and Marcia and had seen that Marcia was still more restless. Curt had made a flimsy excuse and gone back to town that very afternoon.

"You're a dear," said Marcia. "It'll be peaceful down there with the sand and the sea and the children. Perhaps a few other people will go early if we do. I'm going to do a lot of things this summer. I'm going to swim and ride and play tennis every day and see if I don't get away from my unquiet spirit."

"And it's all so good for the hips," said Justine, prosaically. "I'm with you, my dear, in all strenuous exercise."

It was, as Marcia had said, peaceful and lovely with the sand and the sea. Also a few other families did decide to go early since the Burds and Mrs. Crossey were doing it. The people of the Inn, who lived there the year round, welcomed them back joyfully. Even the servants were not so troublesome as usual. And the June sunshine was delightful beyond belief.

The days fell at once into an easy routine. In the morning they would ride, usually along the beach—a yellow crescent of hard-packed sand that stretched for many miles in one sweeping curve—but sometimes back into the woods along the narrow bridle

paths where low-hanging branches switched into the riders' faces the aromatic scent of pine. Or perhaps they would swim, and this year the Inn proprietor had anchored a raft a little way out not too far beyond the surf. The water in the ocean was always warmer than the lagoon. In the afternoons they might go fishing or crabbing in the lagoon, or ride again, or play tennis, or just sit on the sand and loaf. In the evenings Marcia usually read, after Boy had been put to bed; or people would come in to talk or make up a table of auction, or for a little music. And Marcia found that she was always glad to go to bed early. The sea air and the long day outdoors made her sleepy.

"It's been great fun, hasn't it?" she said to Justine Burd, as they walked back from the Inn just before dinner and after a hot game of tennis. "You're not sorry that we came early, are you?"

"No, I should say not. But people are beginning to come now; a man and a woman motored up to the Inn while you were playing in that last set—quite stunning looking people. I didn't recognize them, but they must be friends of somebody in the colony, for no one else ever comes. I wonder who they are?"

"Maybe they're those cousins of the Dashiells—they've been expecting them all week," suggested Marcia, idly. "Look, Justine, how the mist is

creeping in. It's going to be a horrid night. Are you coming over?"

"I don't think so. It's my night in the nursery. Why don't you come to us?"

"I'm so sleepy," said Marcia, frankly. "I think I'll go to bed early and try to catch up with it. I find myself with my head almost in my plate at dinner! Isn't that disgraceful? And perhaps if I go to bed and sleep for ten or twelve hours straight, I'll lose this perpetual drowsiness."

At dinner, however, Aunt Janey did not appear, having gone to bed with a headache from the sun in her eyes, so Marcia ate alone, with a book propped up beside her. It was "The Wife of Sir Isaac Harman," and she found herself completely absorbed by the vagaries of Sir Isaac and the struggle of his lovely lady to extricate herself from the meshes of his petty tyranny. She was not in the least drowsy after dinner, so she took her book into the sitting room and settled herself to finish it.

It must have been about half-past nine when there was a sound of someone hurrying up on the porch, just outside her window. Then a hasty, fumbled ring at the bell. There was something appealing—summoning—about it, and Marcia did not wait for a servant to come. She jumped up and ran out to the hall and flung open the door. The light streamed out upon a woman, who moved eagerly forward

and then stood stone still in dismay and surprise. Marcia stood still, too, and for a moment she could not speak at all. But at last she said, her voice sounding strangely in her ears:

“Leila! What—what do you want?”

CHAPTER XXX

AS SHE asked the question Marcia became aware that Leila had lost her usual cool assurance. She was near to tears, and her hands were shaking as if with cold. She had an air of almost stupefied fright. Marcia leaned forward.

"Come in," she said. "Don't stand out there." And as Leila obeyed her, her mind leaped to the only thing that she could imagine that would have brought Leila to her. She shut the door quickly behind her unexpected guest and seized her by the arm. "Tell me—is anything the matter with Harleth?"

But Leila still looked at her dazedly.

"I didn't know you lived here, Marcia," she said, slowly. "I—I didn't expect to find any one I knew. I went—I went away from the Inn—I meant to ask someone—any one—to take me in for the night; and I saw the light here——"

"But why?" asked Marcia. "The Inn's all right. They're really very nice people. Why couldn't you stay there?" Then she remembered what Justine Burd had said about the man and the woman who had come to the Inn by motor in the afternoon.

"Why——" she went on, "why, you must have been the woman Justine Burd saw come to the Inn this afternoon! Oh, what's the matter, Leila—you look ghastly. Sit down. Is Harleth with you? Have you quarrelled?"

She ushered the other woman farther into the room and pulled a chair for her. Leila sank into it dispiritedly. But at the last question she raised her head.

"No; Harleth isn't with me."

"Then you came just with a chauffeur?" asked Marcia.

There was a moment of strained silence.

"No," said Leila at last, looking past Marcia. "I didn't come with a chauffeur."

It was impossible not to understand, and Marcia stood staring at her in horrified silence. With an effort Leila roused herself.

"You needn't look at me like that," she said, with a little return of spirit. "It's not what you think. I'm in a frightful mess, but I'm not eloping with another man, as you evidently imagine." She pulled herself up out of the chair. "I won't bother you any further, Marcia. I'll go on and find some other place to stay. I suppose this little hole isn't populated entirely with old friends of mine, is it?"

"You're not going to leave here until you tell me what's the matter," said Marcia. "I'll help you,

no matter what sort of a mess you're in—not for your sake, but for Harleth's. I'm not going to have Harleth's—wife" (she hesitated over the word) "trailing about the Beach at this hour of the night, asking strangers to take her in and starting all sorts of wild surmises. You told me you came down here with a man. Now who is he and why did you come?"

Leila sank back again.

"I'll tell you, Marcia, because I don't know what to do—I simply don't. I don't want to go hunting around the town for a place to stay, and I *can't* stay at the Inn. Oh, what a fool I was to let myself get caught like this! I never suspected—honestly—I never suspected for a moment." She looked up at Marcia fretfully. "Do sit down," she said. "I can't even think with you towering over me."

Marcia sat down.

"Go on," she said.

Leila pressed her hands against her forehead with a tired gesture.

"I'm not used to this sort of thing," she complained. "Everything's been so uncomfortable—I'm half dead."

"Who is this man you came here with?" reminded Marcia, inexorably.

A half-sullen, half-defiant look came over Leila's face. She did not look at Marcia, but she began her story.

"His name is Otis Vail; do you know him?"

Marcia shook her head.

"I've known him for a long time—before Harleth and I were married. And he—well, you might as well hear the whole truth of it—he's always made love to me. Harleth doesn't like him and insisted that I shouldn't know him and, as bad luck would have it, he happened to see me with him after I'd practically promised to drop him. And so, after that, I couldn't see him at all in public, but we used to meet just the same in Dorothy Macoin's rooms at the Palais. Do you know her?"

Again Marcia shook her head.

Leila's eyes inflamed with anger.

"Well, she's a treacherous cat—that's what she is!" exclaimed Leila. "She's been pretending to be my devoted friend and all the time she was plotting and planning to get me into this nasty mess. She arranged it all, I'm sure of that. I'll never forgive her as long as I live."

"But what did she do?" asked Marcia, impatiently.

"She told me she'd heard of such a lovely little quiet beach down on the coast—and proposed that we come down together for a few days before she went West for the summer; and I, like an idiot, agreed. Two days ago she called me up to say that she had to go out of town for a day, and would come on

directly here and that I should take the train to the Junction and Otis Vail would meet me there with his car and bring me over."

"Then it was part of the plan that he was to come, too?" asked Marcia, dryly.

"Yes. There's no reason why he shouldn't. Even though Harleth doesn't like him, that's no reason why I should drop him. Of course if I'd known——"

"Go on," commanded Marcia.

"That's all," said Leila. "I got off at the Junction and Otis was waiting for me and brought me here and Dorothy wasn't here and hadn't intended to come! I believe he paid her to keep away. When we first got here and Dorothy wasn't here, he said she was coming on a later train. I kept expecting her and *kept* expecting her, but she didn't come. Then, something he said after dinner, made me suspicious, and so I went down and asked some questions of the landlord—and—and found out the whole thing. There isn't any later train. It was all a vile, contemptible plot between him and Dorothy. Oh, I'll pay her for this! And him, too!"

She was regaining her composure, but the recital did not lose in dramatic value thereby.

"What did you do then?" asked Marcia.

"Oh, I had the most frightful scene with Otis. And he said the most terrible things. He said no

one would believe that I thought Dorothy meant to come—and—and all sorts of things. I was afraid of him and I lost my head and ran out of the Inn to see if I could find another hotel or boarding-house or something—anything—where I could stay tonight and get away from him."

"You can stay here," said Marcia, briefly. She set her lips in an angry line. "I'll telephone to the Inn and let this Otis Vail know you're with someone who will be responsible for you. And then—" She stopped to think. "Then you've got to long-distance to Harleth."

"I will not!" cried Leila, genuinely startled. "He'd never forgive me."

"Nevertheless, you've got to do it. He's not going to be kept in the dark about this. Don't you see, Leila, that it's your very best protection if he knows?"

"No, I don't," said Leila. "It's no protection at all to me. Heaven only knows what Dorothy Macoin will say or do."

"That's exactly the point," said Marcia. "If Harleth knows about it, he can deal with her before she has a chance to do anything. If she really has let you into this thing without your knowledge, as you say, she'll hold it over you as long as you live, and threaten you with letting Harleth know. Can't you see that?"

"You can't long-distance to Harleth to-night, anyway," said Leila, evasively. "He's on his way to Boston."

"I suppose you knew that when you planned this outing," said Marcia.

"Of course I did," returned Leila, with some asperity. "I had to use some forethought, didn't I?"

"It seems to me that if you had just used a little more forethought you wouldn't have been here at all." Marcia spoke angrily.

Leila was still further recovering herself. She had patted her somewhat disarranged dress into place, adjusted her hat, and pushed back her hair into its usual smooth, soft order. "There's no use your preaching, Marcia," she said. "I've told you everything with perfect frankness and though I don't expect you to see it in a sophisticated, woman-of-the-world way, I *don't* want to hear any moral platitudes. If you'll let me stay here to-night and get me away early in the morning, I'll be eternally grateful. No one will ever suspect you of lending your assistance to anything improper, certainly, and even though it is rather droll—that is, your being Harleth's first wife and I his second—"

"Leila, be still," exclaimed Marcia. "You are absolutely the most vulgar woman I ever knew. Yes, you can stay here, and what is more, I'm going to see to it that this Vail person leaves the Beach

to-night. Go upstairs into the first room at the right. You'll find everything there you need."

"If there's any way for me to leave here to-night I won't trouble you, Marcia," said Leila. "But the man at the Inn said he only had one little car and his son had taken it to go somewhere, miles away, for their meat supply. That was one of the first things I asked."

"I'd send you in my own car," said Marcia, "only it happens that I sent Wasson home to-day to come down to-morrow with another cook. No, you'll have to stay to-night, Leila. Please go upstairs and let me deal with this person you brought with you."

It was not until Leila had gone upstairs and Marcia had taken down the receiver that it suddenly occurred to her that Vail might not have used his own name. But she did not hesitate.

"Mr. Broadnax," she said to the proprietor of the Inn, "this is Mrs. Crossey. I want to speak to the man who came late this afternoon, in a motor with a lady. Will you tell him to come to the telephone, please?"

"Mrs. Crossey," came back Mr. Broadnax's troubled voice, "there is something queerish about that couple. Excuse me for asking, but do you know them? They had a quarrel, or a row of some kind, out on the porch after dinner, and she, the lady,

went off and hasn't come back and the man's been walking up and down watching for her."

"I know them," said Marcia, steadily. "She is here with me. Tell him to come to the telephone, please."

There was a longish wait and then a man's voice, anxious and troubled: "Leila—is that you?" he asked. "The man said Mrs. Crossey wanted to speak to me. What made you give away your name like that?"

For a moment Marcia choked with disgust and anger. "This is not Leila, Mr. Vail," she said, at last. "This is another Mrs. Crossey. But Leila is here in my house and she will stay with me to-night. To-morrow morning I shall communicate with her husband and tell him this whole affair. I asked you to come to the telephone to tell you that you must get your car and leave the Beach to-night. If you don't go, I shall speak to Mr. Broadnax and have you put out of the Inn. And there is no other hotel in this place, and no one who will receive you."

"Look here," said the invisible man. "Who are you to think you can bluff me like this! I don't know what sort of a story Leila has told you. Listen—can't I come and see you a minute, myself?"

"You cannot; and if you're wise you'll lose no time ordering your car and getting away. I'll give you

just twenty minutes and I shall call up Mr. Broadnax and tell him to put you out. He'll do it. That's all." She hung up the telephone, decisively.

She went out on the broad veranda and peered at the lights of the Inn through the rolling mist. She would watch there to see whether or not a car was brought round—or whether she would have to carry out her threat to appeal to Broadnax. But she could see no stir, no lights at the Inn garage. She waited, counting her heartbeats, straining her eyes toward the turn in the drive down which the car would have to come. And then she became aware that someone was stumbling toward her in the gray mist, and she knew, without telling, that it was Otis Vail. He came near to the house—uncertainly—and she felt that he had seen her standing there in her white gown, for he stopped, and then came forward again, doggedly, as one who bolsters up a faltering purpose. At the foot of the veranda steps he stopped again and looked up at her.

"Are you the Mrs. Crossey who telephoned to me?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, but did not stir.

He came up two steps.

"Won't you let me see you—let me explain?" he asked, in a queer, gasping way.

"You see me; and there's nothing to explain. I told you what you've got to do."

Otis Vail flung out his arms in a grotesque, insane gesture.

"Oh, good God!" he cried. "I can't stand it! You think I'm a rotten cad and a low brute and everything else that's not fit to talk about, don't you? Didn't you ever see a woman drive a man crazy? She's got me. She's got me. I can't stand any more of it. I'm done!"

"Hush," said Marcia. "Don't add this sort of thing to everything else."

"Let me come in," he pleaded. "I'm going out of my mind—I know that. I'm not responsible. Let me tell you——"

"Come in," said Marcia, on impulse. "I have a few things to say myself."

But her words died on her lips when she saw her second unwelcome guest under the light. Havoc marked him. His face twitched and jerked as if he was suffering intense pain. Shadows ringed his eyes—and a tortured soul looked out of them.

"I don't know you," he said, wetting his lips with his tongue. "I never saw you before, did I? But you said you knew Leila—that she was here, didn't you? What—what did she tell you?"

"It doesn't matter what she told me. But I'm going to let her stay here for the night and you must leave the Beach. You understood that?"

To save her life she couldn't help speaking more gently than before. This poor distracted creature was not dangerous now, whatever he might have been.

"You know what sort of a woman she is, don't you?" he asked, talking as much to himself as to her. "She's a ghoul. She lives on excitement—the excitement of having men make love to her. She wants them to want her—she wants to see them lose their heads and make grovelling beasts of themselves—but she never loses her own head. I thought I could make her do it, I've been a good bit of a beast about women, I suppose. Well, I'm paid for it now. She got me. She was willing enough to come down here when she thought Dorothy Macoin would be with us and she could keep me at arm's length and watch me going crazier and crazier about her, but the minute she found she was alone here with me, she was like a wildcat. I've been sitting over there on the porch thinking about her, and seeing her eyes—and her arms—and the way she moves her shoulders under those thin frocks of hers, and—and I—" He stopped and blinked at the light. He gave a gulp, and dropped into a chair, with his head on the table, and Marcia heard him sobbing—ugly, painful, rasping sobs. But it only lasted a moment. He raised his head and looked at her more sanely. "I'm—I'm sorry I came over here," he said, brok-



only. "I've been talking like a crazy man, I know. I beg your pardon for—for my coming—and for—everything."

He rose to his feet and tried to assume his usual manner, but it was the most pitiful bravado. Marcia held out her hand.

"I'm just as sorry for you as I can be," she said, impulsively. "I really am. And I'll never tell any one in the world about to-night. But—you will get your car and go away, won't you? It's only ten miles or so to Barry's Mills, and there's quite a comfortable little hotel there. I'll—I'll take care that she—" (she groped for words)—"that she—gets back to town all right."

Otis Vail's twitching face pulled itself into a smile that made him hideous to see.

"*You* take care of her!" he said. "My dear madam, you don't need to; she's amply able to take care of herself—and she will, too. She's never done anything else."

He moved heavily to the doorway and went through it without another word. Marcia heard him stumble down the steps and out on the gravel walk. She waited, listening again, as she had listened before he came.

After a wait that seemed a long, long hour, but was no more than a quarter of it, she heard the muttering purr of a high-power car and saw its

headlights flash past the house, twin meteors cleaving the clouds of gray mist.

Marcia Crossey's knees suddenly refused to support her and she almost fell into a friendly easy chair.

"What a *night!*" she said, weakly. "That poor wretch! How miserable, how pitiable!"

Thank heaven, he was gone. But Leila was still here. Marcia hated to think of sleeping under the same roof with Leila; but she'd do it. She'd do anything—anything—to keep Harleth's name clear of the scandal that might have come from a thing like this.

"Has he gone?" asked Leila from the head of the stairs, guardedly. "I heard his voice and I came out in the hall. What *did* he say, Marcia?"

"Now!" it flashed through Marcia Crossey's mind. "*Now!*"

CHAPTER XXXI

MARCIA ascended the stairs and motioned Leila back into her room, followed her in, and stood, looking at her.

"Leila," she said, slowly and measuredly, "that man who just left here said you were a ghoul. But he was wrong. You're a leper. You ruin everything you touch. You know what you did to me. You came into my home and broke it up, just as coolly and as calculatingly as you practise your poses in front of the mirror. You wanted to marry well, and you hadn't been able to find a man with money enough who had all the other things, too. You wanted a young man, a good-looking man, a successful man, a man who had breeding and good people besides money. Oh, I've heard you detail your requirements often enough. Harleth had all of those requirements. So you played on his various weaknesses and finally you got him away from me. That didn't satisfy you. You immediately began to look out for another man to make a fool of, and you picked out this poor Vail person. From what he said to-night I suppose, at first, it was a pretty

even thing between you—he's evidently about the same sort of man that you are a woman. But you were colder and cleverer than he and you've managed to reduce him to a condition bordering on the imbecile. You ran the risk of dragging your name—which is also Harleth's—in the mud of a nasty scandal. You pretty nearly put yourself at the mercy of an insane man—for Otis Vail is temporarily insane—and, as chance would have it, you came to me, who of all women have the biggest score against you, and I must be the one to shelter you, to get the man out of town to prevent the scandal you deserve, and to start you on again, unscathed, looking for new men to repeat this sort of thing indefinitely. I wish I had the courage to turn you into the night and let you find any shelter you could. It's what I ought to do."

Leila in nightgown and négligé, black hair unbound, had shrunk away from Marcia's denunciation and stood against the pale-tinted wall like a lovely decorative picture of despair, modern style. She had not attempted to stop Marcia, or interrupt her, but she answered her quickly enough.

"It's perfectly absurd to take this virtuous tone with me," she said, "and talk as if the things I'd done were criminal, Marcia. About Otis Vail—I wasn't a bit to blame. You yourself admit that he was trying to make me fall in love with him and do

all sorts of silly things, the way so many women do—fling their caps over the windmills, and all that—but I was too clever. He was caught in his own trap. As for Harleth, of course you still feel piqued and angry about Harleth, but I just want to tell you this and everyone who knows him will say so, too—that I've done wonders with him—simply wonders! He doesn't drink any more, he isn't a bit wild and reckless and headstrong, as he used to be. I've reformed him entirely—and that's more than you could have done."

"*You reform Harleth!*" cried Marcia. "As angry and outraged as I am about you and the things you've done, I could almost laugh at that. However Harleth has changed, it wasn't because of you. He found himself, that's all. I always knew he would, some time; I knew he was too fine and big to keep on as he was going. He was just a wild boy, that was all, and he didn't grow out of it as soon as most boys do. But as for you reforming him—you simply don't know what you're saying. I'm as sure as I stand here that you liked him a great deal better before he 'reformed' as you call it. It must have bored you horribly to have him root out his faults and stop his excesses. Oh, Leila—you can't tell me that you reformed Harleth. I know you—and I know him."

Leila chose to disregard this. She drew away

from Marcia and affected an amused scorn of the other's heat, to hide the scorch of it. She had no answer to it.

"How soon can I leave here in the morning?" she demanded. "Can I get that car from the man at the Inn to take me away before any one sees me?"

"You certainly can," said Marcia. "You can leave here about half-past seven and get a train at the Junction so that you'll be back in New York at ten. But that little car of Broadnax's isn't really safe, Leila, and if you'll wait until Wasson comes, I'll send you in my own car."

"What time will he come?" asked Leila.

"About noon, I think. Not later than one or two, I'm quite sure. Then you could get to New York by six o'clock."

"No, I *won't* wait," said Leila, decidedly. "I'd rather go early. I won't stay here a second longer than I must, after being insulted and stormed at in the way you have done to-night."

Marcia sighed, a long, troubled sigh. She started to speak again and then closed her lips. She could not beg Leila to be kinder and truer to Harleth; she could not appeal for his happiness to a woman who talked with such glib shallowness about all the things that were dearest to her own heart.

"I'll call you and see that you go when you wish,"

she said, and went to her own room without another word.

In the dark and cool of it, with the surf outside sounding its even rush and swirl echoingly, as in a great hollow shell, Marcia stood still. "Harleth—Harleth!" she whispered, and felt tears in her eyes and her throat choking with yet more tears. She walked slowly to the window and looked out at the ocean. The mist was lifting and she could see stars in the dark sky. The screen in the window dripped moisture and she put her hot forehead against it. "Harleth," she whispered again. "Oh—I'm so ashamed, my dear. And yet, I couldn't bear it—not to say it all—this once—when she might have been unfaithful to you—when she *was* unfaithful to you in her thoughts. I can't bear it for you. No; it isn't right——"

She dropped on her knees beside the window and crouched there, her arms on the sill, her chin on them, her eyes staring out at the sea. And there she stayed all through the night. She would not let herself sleep while that—that woman was under the same roof. The dawn, creeping up slowly, found her there, stiff and weary, haggard, but all awake.

When she heard the servants stirring, she went downstairs and told them to take some coffee to her room. Then, in the full glory of that early sunshine that comes up from the sea, she walked over to

the Inn and directed the Broadnax boy to bring his little car for a passenger to the early train. She hurried back and found the coffee ready and carried it to Leila, told her to dress and drink it and be ready to leave the house in half an hour.

Leila grumbled a good bit at having to get up so early, but did as she was told. She looked rumpled and oddly old in the morning light. She climbed into the rickety little car without even turning her head to say good-bye and, after some futile chugging and a good bit of fussing with various levers and handles, the Broadnax boy got the engine started and they went away.

After they were out of sight Marcia went back into the house and up to the room Leila had occupied. She broke the cup that Leila had drunk from and carried the pieces far down the beach and flung them violently, as far as she could, out into the waves. Her eyes were dry and hot and her head had begun to ache miserably; she felt like an ugly phantom in the fair morning. When she came back, she sat down on her porch for a while, trying to look a little more her normal self before she went into the house to meet Boy and Aunt Janey at the breakfast table. Then she saw Mr. Broadnax running from the Inn. He called to her and waved his arms frantically. His wife ran after him, waving her arms, too, in a grotesque frenzy.

"Oh, Mrs. Crossey," called the man, as he came panting down toward her, "there's been an accident to Buddy's car. Steering gear broke, I guess. He's up the road there—he's broke his leg—somebody just telephoned in from a farmhouse 'bout halfway to the Junction. And—that lady—that he was taking over from your house—why—why—she's killed!"

CHAPTER XXXII

THE figures of the innkeeper and his wife wavered and dimmed before her, as she flung out incredulous hands toward them. The blood flowed away from her heart as a wave washed down the beach; the wave seemed to be washing her blood and her life and her feeling with it. She tried hard to stand still, but her head swam round, and yet the figures of Mr. and Mrs. Broadnax, ludicrously gesturing, danced before her, and she heard their voices babbling inarticulate panic. With a wrench of her faculties, she focussed her eyes and made herself see them—made herself listen.

“Is your car home, Mrs. Crossey?” Broadnax was saying. “We gotta get up there to Buddy with a doctor, quick’s we can. Oh, my Lord, how I wisht Doctor Masterson had come down this summer.”

“You’ll hafta go into the Junction an’ get Doctor Hilliard—you’ll hafta go into the Junction an’ get Doctor Hilliard,” Mrs. Broadnax was repeating over and over again, while tears streamed down her face.

“An’ somebody’s got to let that lady’s folks know.

Lucky she was a friend of yours, Mrs. Crossey. If she'd a been a stranger we mighta had an awful lotta trouble identifyin' her. Set down, ma'am, you look white's a ghost," he added, hastily.

Marcia did not sit down. She heard herself—in a voice that did not remotely resemble her own—telling Broadnax that her car would not be back until late in the morning. Her mind seemed to go on working quite independently of the turmoil of her heart, and this, she thought, was magically strange, yet she was grateful for it. It was a Marcia Crossey that had no part whatever of her real self who counselled Mrs. Broadnax to go home and prepare a bed for Buddy, and Broadnax to hurry to Mrs. Burd's in search of a motor. While she would telephone, she promised, to the Junction and start Doctor Hilliard to the scene of the accident. And she would—she would notify the—the family of the lady who was killed.

The Broadnaxes went on; and then, for a sickening, dizzying interval, the real Marcia overpowered the other. It was the real Marcia who said aloud, as if protesting against an accusing voice:

"But I did not wish it!"

She stopped there in the doorway as she spoke, and steadied herself against it while, for the briefest second, the knowledge of what Leila's death might signify to her was clear before her, and she knew that

it was this that had shaken and dazed her—from the very instant that Broadnax had called out the words through the sunshine. She thrust back the thought as one hides a shameful thing. And then she went on to send her messages.

It was easy enough to start Doctor Hilliard on his errand of succour, but when, after long struggles with the wire, she at last got Harleth's office on the telephone, she found it almost impossible to tell his people—to explain. But again that other, unknown Marcia helped her through. And a clear-headed underling at the other end of the line was very satisfactory. He said they expected Mr. Crossey at any moment. He was returning from Boston earlier than he had anticipated. They had had telegrams. He should be told, and would of course come on at once. Everything would be looked after—everything. He even politely thanked this kind stranger for sending the message. And all the while Marcia strained her ears for this message she had a sick memory of that night when, with Imogen clawing at her knees, she had heard the message from the St. Quentin—that leering, thick voice, the suggestive words. She shivered a little as she put up the receiver.

And now there was nothing to do but wait. She did not try to sit down to breakfast, but went out and found that everyone available was getting ready

to hurry off to Buddy Broadnax—and the other victim. There was a good deal of talk and getting in each other's way with busy, well-meaning efforts, and a considerable collection of odd things to be taken along, ranging from mattresses to clinical thermometers. But finally the cars got off, with all the men of the colony in them. There were not many. The women gathered in little groups on the porches and talked in low tones. Only the children played on the sand as usual, and their fluting voices sounded odd in the general hush of suspense—yet sweet.

To Marcia the wait was interminable. Justine Burd had come back to the house with her, and they sat together for a while; and she told Justine, a little, but not all, of the night before. Justine turned wide eyes on her.

"And you've telephoned to his office?"

"Yes—they said he'd be met at the station and come right on. He should be here by two o'clock, or a little after."

Justine was silent a little. But she could not forbear asking another question.

"But, Marcia, when—they come back, you know—the cars, I mean—you—you're not going to have her—brought here?"

The real Marcia once more broke through her forced calm.

"NO!" she said, with anger and bitterness such

as Justine had never seen on her face before. "No! Living or dead—she shan't come under my roof again."

To which Justine made sudden unregenerate answer:

"I'm glad of that."

After Justine had gone away it was Aunt Janey's turn, for that good lady was agitated almost beyond endurance. She sat beside Marcia and, in her own way, "grappled" with the situation. Aunt Janey's idea of grappling with the situation was to say things like this: "I never in my whole life heard of anything so awkward, Marcia"; and "It seems too bad that it had to happen in just this way"; and "How do you suppose she ever chanced to come here, of all places?"

Somehow, though she did not understand how she managed it, Marcia answered the questions and tried to soothe Aunt Janey, for she felt the solicitude behind the tactlessness, and she saw that the poor old creature was distressed and super-sensitive to the possible comment that would ensue. She anticipated that her own little circle of bridge-fiends would ask her questions and say: "Let me see—your niece was the first wife, was she not?" and Aunt Janey could not cope with anything like that. She anticipated mental stripes—and she could not help showing it. It was very odd that Marcia could be so calm, she thought.

But Marcia's calm was the calm of abstraction. While she answered Aunt Janey, and tried to say the expected things to her, she was alone with her thoughts of Harleth. What would she say to him? How explain? Had it not been her fault that Leila had gone in the way she did? She knew that Buddy Broadnax's little car was not safe—she *knew* and though she had protested against Leila's going in it, she had not been very urgent. She had wanted her to go—that was the truth of it. But she had not wished—*this*. No, never. She had not wished this, not in her greatest height of scorn and resentment. And then there were moments when she was not sure whether she was honest with herself or not. She hoped Harleth would believe that she had not wished for Leila's death. Oh, he must believe it.

But what would she say to him about the rest of it? Should she tell the true story—all of it—with Otis Vail and the ugly implications that went with him? And that other woman (what was her name?—Dorothy—Dorothy something) who had been mixed in it indirectly—perhaps she could confirm it. The innkeeper and his wife could tell a part, too. And then the impossibility of thus forever blackening Leila's name—with Leila lying dead and silent! No, she could never do that. If Leila were alive she could tell with better grace. But there must be no vulgar tattling now. If Harleth asked why Leila

had come there, she, Marcia, would tell him she did not know, and say no more. He might find out for himself if he would, but she would not tell him.

Aunt Janey had kept a constant watch on the roadway and now she started up in nervous panic.

"I believe they're coming back," she said. "I'm going to my room, Marcia. I simply can't stand this sort of thing. And if there should be reporters —" She paused. Reporters were ever worse than the presence of death to Aunt Janey.

Marcia got up, also, her heart beating frantically.

"Do whatever will make you most comfortable," she said, vaguely, "and don't—don't worry." But Aunt Janey was already hurrying away.

The cars came in slowly. Buddy Broadnax—with his leg in an improvised splint, his eyes drowsy from an injection of morphia which had been given him to relieve the first agony of the splintered bone—was held in his father's arms as if he had been a baby. And in the car behind—— Marcia could not force herself to look.

The cars went past on their way to the Inn. Hardly knowing what she did, Marcia went out on the porch and down the steps and followed them. Justine Burd was coming behind her and presently the two women walked along together.

"If I can do anything——" said Marcia.

And at the door of the Inn they met Broadnax,

who had got Buddy on to a bed and left him to his mother's care. His worn and anxious face cleared at sight of Marcia.

"I was just going over to your house, Mrs. Crossey," he said. "Your friend—the lady, you know—she wasn't killed, after all. I oughta telephoned in but I was that upset over Buddy'n' all—"

"Not dead!" cried Justine Burd, and linked a supporting arm hastily in Marcia's. "But I thought—"

"Yes'm, everybody thought so," said Broadnax. "She was just kinda stunted, I reckon, and she didn't come to till long after Buddy did. She's cut and bruised a lot, and maybe something hurt internal, the doctor says. I thought you'd want to let her folks know, f'r they'll think she's dead by that first message."

Justine and Marcia did not look at each other; it was a moment of realization that struggled between sensible relief and shame at primitive disappointment. Marcia did not, could not, speak.

"Well—we'll take care of that," stammered Justine, at last. "And hadn't we—hadn't I better send for trained nurses, Mr. Broadnax?—they'll be needed, I'm sure."

"We don't need a nurse f'r Buddy," said Broadnax. "Mother'n me c'n take care of him. A broken leg's not s'much, you know—I broke my leg and arm, too,

once when I was a youngster. It's a wonder, though, he wasn't killed. Y'see, it happened this way: The steering gear went bad right at the foot of that awful long hill that has the turn at the bottom—you know, the one where that low-standin' concrete buttress holds the road up fr'm crumblin' right down into the crick. The car smashed right into the concrete and twisted over and caught Bud's leg. But it threw the lady clear out, right jam up against the stone. Nobody could've helped it; it just happened."

Still Marcia could not speak.

"They *were* lucky to get out alive!" said Justine. "I'm so glad for you and Mrs. Broadnax that Buddy's hurt no worse. Come, Marcia, we'll go back to your house and send for nurses. Maybe they'll get here before night, if we make haste."

Mrs. Broadnax's voice, from within, could be heard summoning her husband, and the two women turned hastily away.

"It would be only decent, I suppose," said Marcia, in a hard voice, "if we stayed and helped. You can do it if you want to, Justine, *but I can't*."

"I'll go back presently," said Justine, "when I've got you home and telephoned for those nurses. But I don't blame you—I don't see how you could——"

"It's a grotesque," said Marcia, as if she had not heard Justine. "The first Mrs. Crossey—the second Mrs. Crossey—oh, why did she ever come here, of all

places. I thought surely I was out of her reach—and now she comes again and takes away my peace of mind, and makes me miserable. I wish I could have been a little bit harder last night and driven her back to the Inn and let her take the consequences of her own folly. I wish I'd——”

Justine checked her with practical kindness.

“Is there any way to get word to her people about her?” she asked. “It might prevent a lot of unpleasantness, later. I’ll gladly attend to all the details, if you’ll just tell me where to wire or ‘phone?”

“Harleth’s on his way here,” answered Marcia. “You might telephone and catch him at the Junction. He could wire to her father and mother from there. The train’s due there at one, Justine, and it’s almost that now. The station master would probably attend to it.”

“Then I’ll go on to my house and do it at once. You’d better go in and lie down—you look awfully tired and worn.”

Imogen met Marcia at the door and echoed Justine’s parting words.

“Let me bring you some tea, Mrs. Crossey, dear,” she begged in distressed devotion, “you do look that white! Miss Prentice she’s having luncheon sent up to her room, and Nurse and Master Harleth have gone on a bit of a picnic down on the beach, and if you’d just settle down in a shady corner

here——” Her deft hands drew up a lounging chair and a footstool, pulled down a curtain, adjusted a soft pillow. She urged Marcia into the chair with affectionate compulsion.

But as a matter of fact, Marcia needed little urging. The scene of the night before, the sleepless night, the morning with its stress of emotion, had taken heavy toll of her strength. She comprehended how well Imogen had planned that the house should be clear with Aunt Janey lunching upstairs, and Boy and Nurse sent out of the way, and she dropped wearily down into the chair, thankful for this bit of tender service.

“Now just put your head back and close your eyes, ma’am,” said Imogen, “and I’ll bring you up the tea in a jiffy. And if you could catch forty winks——” She was off without completing her sentence.

With the physical relief of ease and shade and quiet, Marcia’s eyes closed and she leaned her head against the cool chintz of the chair and gave a little tired sigh. Her eyeballs burnt against the dry lids, but presently a film of tears crept up and moistened them. The impulse of bitterness that had made her denounce Leila to Justine died down and in its place there came dull thankfulness that she was spared seeing her hands even so indirectly stained with blood. She was spared telling Harleth——

Her eyes came open with a start, and she sat up.

A powerful tearing motor had stopped before the house with a grinding of brakes like a human cry, and someone was hurrying up to the house. The door was flung open without the formality of a knock, and Harleth Crossey himself stood before her, staring at her, as she wavered to her feet, as if he did not dare believe his eyes.

"*Marcia!*" he cried, "*Marcia—they told me you were dead!*"

She struggled up from the chair and looked at him. Lines of strength and maturity had come into his self-indulgent boy's face, and at his temples there were flecks of silver in the hair that had been so black. Only his faun's eyes were not changed, though now they were not laughing, but full of bewildered suffering.

"What is it?" he asked, coming nearer. "Are you ill—are you hurt? They told me at the office—I just came back this morning—that you—that my wife—was dead——"

"Then you didn't get the message we sent to the Junction?" she asked, dazedly, not knowing where to begin what she had to say.

"I got off at the station above the Junction and hired a car there. What was the message? Sit down—you look horribly ill—what's been the matter?"

She turned her head away from him and the words choked in her throat.

"It isn't I. I'm not—your wife, you know. It was—it was Leila who was hurt—and at first they thought she was dead——"

"*Leila!* Leila's in New York!"

"No, she's here—over at the Inn."

"But she can't be. She was in New York when I left for Boston, and she said nothing at all about going away."

"No, she came here—to meet a friend of hers—Mrs. Macoin——"

"But she couldn't have! Dorothy Macoin was on the same train to Boston that I was. I saw her—I spoke to her. Are we both crazy, Marcia?"

So Leila was right—it had been a trap; and Dorothy Macoin had taken care that Harleth should see her on her way to Boston, so that if afterward anything should fall awry with Otis Vail's plans, she could prove, by Harleth himself, that she was not concerned in them. Marcia pieced it together slowly, and yet surely. But she could not tell this to the man who stood before her.

"Leila is here," she said. "She came here last night expecting to meet Mrs. Macoin, and through some mistake, I suppose, Mrs. Macoin didn't come. And this morning Leila went over to the Junction in an old automobile driven by a boy—the son of the innkeeper, and there was an accident. They thought she was dead. I telephoned to your office,

early, as soon as I heard. They've just brought her back. She's badly injured——”

“You telephoned to my office? It was you?”

“Yes.”

“When they told me—I never thought it was you who had telephoned—I thought—I thought it was you who had died—Marcia——” He paused, and gulped back heartbreak. “When they said the message came from here—I never thought—— Of course I knew you were here,” he finished, brokenly.

“You knew I was here?”

“I always know where you are. I never dreamed—I couldn’t have—that it might be—Leila.”

Leila’s name in his mouth recalled Marcia to her pride.

“But it is Leila,” she said, quietly. “She is at the Inn, as I said. It is the second house from here—you can’t possibly miss it.”

For a long, long moment Harleth Crossey stood and looked at her as if he had never seen her before. Then, without a word, he went out of the house, and she knew that he turned toward the Inn.

Imogen, coming in with the tray, was struck anew with the pallor on her mistress’s face.

“You do need something ‘ot,” she said, reprovingly. “And if that ’orrid sea-breeze ‘asn’t gone and blown the door open again. Shall I pour your tea, Mrs. Crossey? And you’ll try a bit of this toast,

won't you? And Cook would send up a slice of cold fowl—she'll be that 'urt if you don't nibble at it."

She poured the tea and hovered over Marcia with the evident determination that she should eat. And after a moment her care was rewarded. Marcia sat up, drank the tea, and ate some of the toast.

"Imogen," she said, with sudden resolution, "could you pack this afternoon, so that we could all start for Canada or the Adirondacks, or—or—*somewhere*, to-morrow morning?"

Imogen was startled but not dismayed.

"I think I can, me'm, if Bocock will undertake to do Miss Prentice entire, and Nurse will take care of Master Harleth's things. I can get the 'ouse closed and all the rest of it. Wasson, 'e's back, and 'e can 'elp."

"Then go ahead and begin," said Marcia, desperately, "I'll be up presently and help you. I won't stay here—I can't. This place is *unendurable*."

She did not intend that last word for Imogen's ears, but the maid heard it, and wagged her head in sympathy.

"That's what Cook and Nurse are always saying, too, me'm, 'ealthy, but fierce, as the h'American dialect 'as it."

And having successfully tacked Comedy to Tragedy, she started upstairs, every line of her back expressing the will and the energy to accomplish prodigies of packing.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THEY would not let him see Leila for some hours, and so there was nothing for Harleth Crossey to do but send telegrams, and, those being dispatched, to stalk about the little Inn and watch the sea from its windows. He kept his eyes resolutely away from the direction of Marcia's house, though now and then, as children ran up and down the beach, he could not help but look after them wondering whether his son was among them. The feeling of *grotesquerie* that Marcia had felt communicated itself to him—that he should be here in this funny little out-of-the-way place—forcing himself to think solicitously of Leila, while all the time Marcia filled his mind; and that he should look at little children, and wonder which was his own son—his own son! Marcia had been so white—so ill, yet just the relief of knowing that she was alive! What if the message had been true, as he had thought?—what if he had come and Marcia had been dead, and he had had to face that final closing of the door of happiness? For though she was no longer his, yet just to know that she was alive and

lovely and dear as she had always been—— He had not known how much Marcia's mere being in the world, although away from him, had counted with him.

He pulled himself up with a sigh. He had no right to be thinking in this way of Marcia. Yet hadn't he? And how could he possibly keep from it? But upstairs, broken and suffering, was Leila. He jerked himself impatiently back to Leila, though he couldn't see yet how she had ever chanced to come here. She couldn't have been coming to meet Dorothy Macoin, as Marcia had said. Had Leila seen Marcia, he wondered?—had she, by any chance, come all the way here to do some final small hurt or indignity to Marcia? But he couldn't quite imagine that. No, Leila was too well satisfied with what she had done to Marcia before to follow her for any petty reason whatsoever. Yet, Leila loved luxury so well that there must surely have been some cogent reason for her coming to this bare little Inn. Comfortable place enough, but decidedly not the sort Leila favoured. It was a curious mystery, and he could not solve it by any formula of Leila's past. He wished that confounded country doctor would come down and tell him something about her condition. Of course they'd have to have a specialist, but he didn't like to send for other doctors until he had at least seen this chap. But presently he had that pleasure.

Doctor Hilliard was that type of country doctor that is, when sober, little short of a medical genius. To-day, luckily, he had been sober when they had called him, and he had had no chance to take a drink since, so he was still in the condition he particularly disliked. He was a short, paunchy man of middle age, whose mild gray eyes betrayed at once his genuine sweetness of temper, his pitiful lacking of will. Not that he lacked either will or decision when treating his patients, but he had found country practice so dull that dram drinking alone could cast a roseate glow over its dull monotony, and he lived in such fear of prohibition that he had secretly set up a tiny still in his own cellar. Yet he was never known to drink when he had an important case on hand. Moreover, he was a shrewd judge of character. He read what was in Harleth Crossey's mind before he was over the threshold, and proceeded at once to make it easy for him to express it.

"You really ought to have someone down from the city to see Mrs. Crossey," he began, pleasantly. "We country doctors are all very well for the usual run of ailments, and we can set a broken arm or leg or collarbone, but in a case of this kind, where there may be internal injuries, and such a severe shock—well, I'd feel easier after a consultation, if you don't mind."

"Any one you will name, I'll gladly send for," said

Harleth. "You think, then, that my wife's condition is very—serious?"

"It might be," said Doctor Hilliard; "and she might be quite all right again in a week, with perhaps a little scar or two, and of course that ankle that caught and twisted is badly sprained. It's practically impossible to tell until to-morrow, possibly not until the day after. They tell me that a Mrs. Burd, who's one of the summer people here, has sent for nurses. That's very sensible—there ought to be two. Mrs. Broadnax is a mighty good woman, and willing, but of course she isn't a professional nurse."

"I didn't know," said Harleth. "I don't know the people here, you see. But of course, anything—everything you need or want you shall have."

"Yes, I suppose so; and so I telephoned Mrs. Burd to go ahead," said the doctor. "Now, about another physician—" And he went off into a discussion of possibilities. In the end, he supplied Harleth with names and addresses of half a dozen. "We're sure to get a couple out of that many," he said—and announced his own intention of staying with his patient until a nurse might be obtained.

"Can I see her?" asked Harleth, at last.

Doctor Hilliard hesitated. "You can look in at her," he said, "though it probably won't reassure

you. She won't recognize you, but perhaps you'd feel better—a little more easy about her."

He led the way upstairs and down an airy hall, pushed open the door that stood ajar, and stood back to let Harleth see past him. It was not, as he had said, reassuring. There were bandages about her head and shoulders, and her eyes were shut. Her arms lay outside the sheet, the palms half open, helplessly, and she seemed little and shrunken. Only the vivid black line of her eyebrows and the black shadow of her lashes identified her.

"She was badly cut and bruised about the face and across the shoulders," said the doctor, "but there will be no permanent blemishes. I know how much ladies care about that sort of thing. I tell you honestly that I don't think you need to be seriously alarmed about Mrs. Crossey's condition. And now that you've seen her, the very best service you can do her would be to go and see this Mrs. Burd and rush the nurses along, if it's possible."

He watched Harleth as he went downstairs. "Screw loose somewhere in this matter," thought the good little doctor. "He didn't really want to see her and he was glad enough to get away. He's going to do the decent thing by her, and all that—but in his heart he doesn't give a damn."

It was a relief to have something definite to do, and Harleth went thankfully to find Justine Burd.

That young woman studied him with interest during their brief interview. The nurses, two of them, very competent, were on their way, she assured him; they would come on the evening train. He was, of course, very anxious, she supposed. And he said, without much conviction, that it had been a shock, of course, but that the doctor was hopeful. Justine did not offer help or hospitality; she felt a certain loyalty to Marcia in withholding these. But when Harleth had gone, she made a comment on him different from the doctor's. "He *is* fascinating," she admitted.

It was on his way back from Mrs. Burd's that Harleth met the one person whom he had longed most to see, and the meeting put the last touch of unpleasantness on his day. Nurse had recognized him instantly, and was for passing him with her head in the air, but he had stopped her. Truth to tell, she was consumed with sudden panic lest he might have come to take away her charge. Even when he spoke to her, she put Harleth Junior on the side farthest from his father, and her demeanour indicated that the boy wasn't within miles. But Harleth brushed these pretences aside.

"Why, Nurse," he said, "aren't you going to speak to me? And is this——?"

"This is Master Harleth, if you please, sir," said Nurse, coldly, still keeping Boy at a distance. "I

hope I see you well, sir," she added, in a tone that indicated a wish that he might be suffering with slow poison, at least.

"But—does he know me?" asked Harleth, dropping on one knee on the sand. He held out his hand.

"How do you do?" he said gravely to Boy, and feeling a sharp pang as the eyes, so like Marcia's, looked at him from the childish face, in impersonal friendliness.

"How do you do," said Boy, promptly, shaking hands like a man.

He was straight and sturdy, his cheeks were red, and all the rest of him—his arms and hands and chubby legs—was tanned a healthy brown.

"Do you—do you know who I am?" asked his father.

"I don't fink I do," said Boy, glancing uncertainly at Nurse for prompting. "You're maybe the new ice-cweam-cone man?" he ventured hopefully. "Muvver said there would be a new ice-cweam-cone man pretty soon."

Harleth got up abruptly and turned away. His wife, for so he named Marcia, and now his son, were alike denied him.

"No—I— Oh, never mind. Nurse—take him on," he said.

And Nurse lost no time in obeying. She didn't

trust any wayward parent in the proximity of Boy, the desirable. But all the same; she felt an undeniable pang of pity. "He's getting his comeuppance," she reflected, "when his own flesh and blood takes him for an ice-cream-cone man. Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings," she added, with a feeling of having beheld virtue rewarded and vice properly crushed. And she glanced fondly at Boy and realized anew that he was the brightest child and the quickest and the smartest and sensiblest in the world, without the shadow of a doubt

CHAPTER XXXIV

OUT of the half-dozen specialists, two in time responded as available and, in due course, they foregathered with Doctor Hilliard at the bedside of Leila, Mrs. Harleth Crossey. Nurses were by this time also in attendance. Buddy Broadnax, farther down the hall, made his mother leave his bedroom door open in hopes that he would hear something interesting, and Mrs. Broadnax herself was not above lurking near at hand on the same intent. Harleth stayed downstairs, well out of earshot. For one thing, ever since Leila had regained consciousness and a knowledge of where she was and what had happened, she had refused to see him with an earnestness that might lead to serious consequences, Doctor Hilliard suggested, if not humoured.

During that soul-trying wait, Harleth Crossey made a discovery that robbed the hour of much of its length for him. He observed, by accident, that the house where Marcia lived was empty and closed, the windows shuttered, the door boarded up. He had not been in an observer's post when her trunks

and her car and her servants and her family and herself had made their departure, and up to this time he had avoided looking at the house. It was pure chance that now his eyes rested on it, as he paced the porch and waited for the doctor's verdict. The Broadnaxes had not mentioned Marcia's going to him—as a matter of fact, they were too much in awe of him to offer any bits of local gossip—and besides the demands of the two invalids beneath their roof absorbed all their energies and thought.

So Marcia had flown, and he had not known it. Speculation over the whys and wherefores and ultimate end of her flight engaged him exclusively from the first instant he saw that shuttered house. He was, on the whole, glad that she had gone, for the temptation had lain hard on him to go to her again, and her nearness had tried him more than he had thought it could. He wondered if his nearness had so troubled her that she could not submit to it. She must have known that he did not wish to stay, and that he would not willingly have driven her out of her home again. A sting of too-exact memory supplied the last word, and he was so preoccupied with it that he did not hear the eminent specialists coming down the stairs, or notice them until they were before him. But he looked sufficiently anxious and unhappy to satisfy them, and Doctor Hilliard began to think that he had wronged the man in

thinking that his wife's sufferings were nothing to him.

The doctors were agreed that Mrs. Harleth Crossey's condition was grave, yet not dangerous. She must not be moved—at least not for several weeks. The ankle, the bruises and cuts and contusions were negligible, and would heal easily with proper care. But—and here they hesitated portentously—there seemed to have been some slight—oh, very slight, perhaps—spinal injury, which might right itself, owing to the patient's splendid health and excellent constitution, or it might develop adversely. Time alone would tell. They repeated that she must not be moved, and expressed the unanimous opinion that pessimism was uncalled for. Yet, with even a chance of the spinal injury becoming more serious the spokesman of the three paused again. His look was prophecy of dire results in case that should happen.

It was finally arranged that the specialists should return within a week, and that Doctor Hilliard should notify them instantly if there was any change in the patient before that. They complimented Doctor Hilliard, and the good fat little man impulsively determined to keep off whiskey until Mrs. Crossey was out of danger and thus live up to the things these two bigwigs of his profession said of him. He was also privately sure that the encomiums were not undeserved.

Presently the specialists departed for the train, and Doctor Hilliard took it upon himself to advise the husband of his patient

"This is a quiet place for you, no doubt, Mr. Crossey," he began, "and there's no reason why you shouldn't go back to the city and get at your office again. I know how you big business men feel when you're kept away from your work. You can't do a thing for Mrs. Crossey by staying here, and I'll have one of the nurses 'phone to you every morning, and I'll 'phone myself every night, so that you'll know exactly how things are going. That is, of course, if you feel that it's safe to leave your wife in my hands."

"I feel quite easy about that," said Harleth, "but I hate to go away and leave her here so alone, even with the best of care. It's possible that her mother may be able to come out in a few days, but until then, I feel that I ought to stay."

"Of course I can appreciate that," said the doctor. "Very natural and proper, I'm sure. But the fact is, it seems to be weighing on Mrs. Crossey's mind that she's keeping you here. I rather suspect that there's something behind it—some nervous fear that she is worse hurt than we have told her. If you went away she'd be pretty certain that she's not badly off. D'you see?—the thing's mental—a matter of nerves."

They talked of it a little longer and finally Har-

leth decided to go. His spirits rose when the decision was made; there was no blinking the fact that it was a release. When he went to see if he might say good-bye to Leila, an alert nurse cautioned him to quiet, finger on lip. She was asleep; and the last he saw of her was just a silhouetted outline, blurred with bandages, in that darkened quiet room. Even that sight could not dash the relief he felt at going. He told himself that he'd get Mrs. Templeton down there at once; and of course he would have messages every day; and at the slightest change he would rush back.

But it was two months before he did come back. And then he came because Leila sent for him.

She had been very adroit in making excuses for him to stay away, and he had recognized that beneath them she was as little desirous of seeing him as he was of seeing her. She had got steadily better, and that absolved him somewhat from the necessity of being with her, and he told himself that her mother's presence made his superfluous. But when her note came, saying briefly that she wanted to see him, he went at once.

It had been early June when he left, and now it was August, but there seemed to be no change in the little beach town save that more umbrellas dotted the sand and more children played beside the waves. He did not mean to look at Marcia's house as he

passed, but his head simply twisted about of itself and he saw that it was still locked, still empty. He wondered, as he had wondered so often in the interim, where she might be. This time he had not tried to find out her whereabouts.

He exclaimed at sight of Leila: "Why, you're looking magnificent—blooming. How's the back—and the ankle?"

She gave her quick, impatient shrug.

"I didn't ask you to come down here to talk about my ankle or my back, Harleth. I'm perfectly well again—I could have left here two weeks ago, but I stayed to make my plans. Shall we walk down the beach?—there won't be any one about, and I must talk to you."

She was her old self, but the enforced rest and the sea air had given her a fresher colour, and had put a delicate softness, a curve of flesh, upon her slender litheness. For the rest, she was crisp in white linen, and her wide white hat was at its characteristic tilt over her sleek, dark hair. Walking beside her Harleth had that sense of her as a woman strange and alien to him. It was not a new definition of Leila to him, and after the lapse of time it was stronger than it had ever been.

"Have they taken good care of you?" he asked, searching his mind for something to say. "Have you had everything you wanted?"

"Oh, yes—everything one could have in a dull little hole like this! Mother's been rather a trial at times, particularly at first—inclined to tears and prayers, you know. That little Doctor Hilliard's an amusing person, Wasn't it wonderful that I haven't a scar? I have just one—on my left shoulder—but it looks like a dimple; it'll be fascinating in a low gown."

They walked along in silence a little, and then Leila, glancing up at him, came out with it.

"Harleth, I want to be free. No, don't say a word. It won't be the slightest use. I've settled everything, and I shall go out to Nevada next week, and take Mother with me, and get a divorce there as quickly as I can. Of course, you're as horribly bored with our marriage as I am, so it will be the best thing for both of us."

She waited, but he did not speak.

"You've changed so you're not a bit like you were when you were married to Marcia," she accused him.

"Leave Marcia out of *this*," he broke in, hastily.

"There; you see? You're far more scrupulous about her than you have any right to be. But let that go. It doesn't matter now. You can go back to her if you like as soon as we're divorced. We might just as well look at the whole thing sensibly and consider the future as well as the present."

"I'm trying to look at it—sensibly," said Harleth

Crossey, slowly. "You spoke of plans you'd made, and looking to the future. I take it these plans must include something beyond this Reno divorce. Would you mind telling me what they are?"

Leila did not ruffle at his tone. She was still perfectly cool.

"I don't in the least mind—in fact, I think it's better that you should know. I'm going to marry Otis Vail."

"You're going to marry—Otis Vail!"

"Yes," Leila went on, calmly. "You may know that his bank is going to send him to Paris to head a branch establishment there. It's very important, and it will be much more amusing to live in Paris than in New York. I've always wanted to do—just that."

Harleth swung round and faced her.

"Are you telling me, in cold blood, that you've decided to get a divorce from me, and have someone else all picked out to marry? What sort of woman are you, anyway?"

"I'm very much the same sort of woman, I think," she said (her words quickened now with resentment), "that you are a man. You did practically the same thing—with Marcia, didn't you? You wanted to get away from her to marry me and you did it. If it is so shocking for me, why wasn't it a little bit more shocking for you? As for me,

I'm hurting no one. You'll be quite glad that our marriage is broken up, and so shall I be. You may remember that Marcia—suffered, or was reported to."

"You—to talk about Marcia! You—to pretend that this cold-blooded arrangement that you've entered into with Vail is like——"

"Well, isn't it? Don't be so emotional. Divorce, my dear Harleth, is merely a see-saw. And one of the two parties on a see-saw is inevitably up whilst the other is down. When you got your divorce you were up, and Marcia was down. Now, I'm up, if you please, and you're down. It's the only way to play at this particular sort of game. I can't imagine why you're so bitter about it—you really ought to be very glad. Otis Vail and I will hit it off ever so much better than you and I possibly could. He's mad about me—and I shall take care to see that he stays so. And then—there's always Paris."

"I see," said Harleth, more controlledly. "And I suppose you mean to go through life taking whatever you want from it. You wanted me—and you got me, and now you want Otis Vail and Paris, and after that——"

"I've been perfectly frank and fair about this," said Leila, coolly again, "because I thought it would be the best way. I had no idea that you were likely to fly into moral spasms over it. As for going through life taking what one wants—there, again,

I'm merely following your example. You have no right to preach to me about that—indeed, very few people have. We're all trying very hard to get the things we want, aren't we? I'd never have dreamed that you'd be so hypocritical. However, this sort of talk gets us nowhere. I wanted to say to you that I shall keep just the money you've settled on me, and nothing more. I shan't ask for any alimony."

Suddenly Harleth Crossey burst out laughing.

"Leila," he said, "I take off my hat to you. For cold-blooded nerve you have no equal. By all means keep the money I settled on you and let me give you ten thousand or twenty thousand—or anything you want—for your expenses in Reno. I want to be sure that you get this divorce, and I'm perfectly willing to take the down-end of the see-saw until you do. May I ask what are the grounds of your suit? Will it be cruelty, or incompatibility, or what? I'm interested to know if you've arranged that, too."

"It will be whatever is the quickest and easiest to get a divorce with," said Leila, seriously. "I thought the lawyers out there would know best."

"I'm sure they will," said Harleth, still laughing. "And now I think I'll go back and see if I can't get out of this town to-night. You may consider that everything is arranged. Don't bother to come back with me. We'll say good-bye here. Let me wish you—eventually—a delightful residence in Paris."

CHAPTER XXXV

AUGUST. September. October. November.
December. January. February. There was snow a foot deep over Marcia's garden and the afternoon sunlight against its crystal whiteness flung dazzling, clear reflections into Marcia's sitting room to tease her old lustres into coquettish twinklings, and flatter her old brass into thinking itself gold, and to entice Marcia away from her fire and her book. More than once she had looked at the white and blue and gold outside, and told herself that she must get out in it all. But it was next to impossible to leave Evan Harrington and the Countess and Old Tom and Lady Jocelyn in their gigantic comic tangle of cross-purposes and schemings, and she went on, page after page, finding that special flavour in her reading that we all enjoy when we really should be out of doors taking what is known as healthful exercise. The situation lends a zest even to the inevitable stuffiness it produces.

So it was with a little shrug of impatience that she heard the bell ring and waited for the inevitable announcement of a caller. She should not have de-

layed her reading so near to tea-time, she reflected, for now she'd surely get no walk. She hoped it might be Justine, or Minny Dashiell with that book of Botrel's ballads that she had promised to bring. But she did not expect, and had no faint premonition, that when the door opened Harleth would come in.

He entered as one not sure of his welcome, but determined, at least, to present his case. He was ruddy from the cold air outside, and the colour gave him a boyish look—there was something boyish, too, in his manner—he might have been the youngster who throws a ball through a window and comes to apologize and confess the broken pane. He began confusedly, and yet eagerly:

"I didn't write and ask you if I might come, because I was afraid you might say no. I didn't know whether you'd see me or not, but I went and talked to Mother and she said—she said she thought you would, Marcia. Would you have seen me, Marcia, if I'd written and asked?"

He was asking for understanding, for mercy. It touched her keenly that he should be so humble, he who had always acted as if his wish, his will, were all-embracing laws for his universe.

"Of course I'd have seen you," she began; but he went on, not waiting for her to finish the sentence.

"I didn't want to drive you away—last summer. I didn't intend—oh, you knew when I came—that

day—that I was half crazy. I thought you were dead—and then, when you explained and sent me on—of course you had to do it, but you must have known how jumbled I was—I couldn't make head or tail of the whole thing till afterward. I wouldn't have come back to worry or torment you."

The book dropped softly from her lap and she twisted her hands nervously together.

"Oh, I know that," she said. "It wasn't your being there—it was the whole thing. It seemed grotesque. I *couldn't* stay. But it doesn't matter."

"No, it doesn't matter," he echoed, almost absently. He came and sat down near her. "Marcia—it sounds silly, maybe, but all the time I never felt as though we weren't married—you and I. Let me say it. I know I was just a vain, headstrong, damned fool. I haven't even been properly punished for what I did, though I thought I was, God knows, when I realized that you'd left me and that I'd have to marry her—and I was all over my idiotic infatuation for her by that time. Do you know—what she's done now?"

"No."

She drew away from him. The mention of Leila dropped a hard barrier between them.

"I'll have to tell you just as she told it to me. She got tired of me, Marcia, and she went out West and got one of those pay-your-money-and-get-your-

decree-quick divorces out there, and the day after she got it she married another man—a fellow named Vail——”

“What, Otis Vail?” cried Marcia. “But he was the man——” She stopped, she wasn’t willing to tell Leila’s story, even now.

“What do you know about him?” demanded Harleth, in his old, imperious tone. “You never knew him.”

“I saw him—just once, and I—I heard that he was in love with Leila.”

“And she’s in love with the fact that he’s got an appointment in Paris, and they can live there. They’ve sailed. I waited until they were out of the country—and then I couldn’t wait any longer. And so—and so——” His eyes besought her to help him.

“And so——?” She questioned, with a little half smile. He was so engaging, so dear in his blunders and folly, this Harleth.

He saw the smile and gathered heart from it.

“Oh, you know why I came,” he said. “Marcia, Marcia dear, I don’t want to ask anything that will trouble you, but what’s the use of our waiting when we’ve lost all these years already? We’ll have to go through some sort of a ceremony, I suppose, to make the thing legal, but you’re my wife, as you’ve always been. I’ll try to make it up to you. It

won't be the same, of course. I was *such* a fool, Marcia. I thought I could do anything and get away with it, and then—every way I turned I got whacked. All those old platitudes about 'the way of the transgressor,' and 'an eye for an eye,' and 'as ye mete'—I never thought they had anything to do with *me*. And even when I began to realize, even then I went bulling it along, and wouldn't try to pull up. Well, I got mine, good and plenty, and I deserved it; but the worst of it was all the other people I got into it, too. And you, most of all. I've been wondering and wondering whether you truly could forgive me. I didn't know—I didn't see how you could. And yet——"

Across the chasm of the lonely, unsatisfied years, the heartache, the humiliation, Marcia Crossey looked at her husband and felt something of the unbreakable tie between them. She knew that for all his repentance he was as he had been before—that he would hurt her again, in a thousand ways, in their life together, and that she would never be strong and fine enough to make him over, or shield herself from the painful difficulties of his faults and her inadequacies. Yet above and beyond this was the demand that might not be denied, the demand marriage makes upon two who are truly married, that concession, adjustment, endurance, shall not be shrunk from, nor denied, but lived fully, and so sub-

ordinated and forgotten, in the greater thing which is true love, tried, yet understanding.

"We'll go back," he was saying, "to Wellsridge, and open the house there—your 'golden house,' Marcia. I've not been near it since you left it. It's been closed, waiting for you. It must—it must be lonesome for you—as I've been."

There, too, she saw the difficulties, the embarrassments, of taking up again that old life, among people who, be they ever so kind-hearted and welcoming, cannot forbear whisperings of excitement and amusement at the thought of double divorce and remarriage. It wouldn't be pleasant—and she would bear the brunt of it. And it had all been so unnecessary.

Harleth had been watching her, aware of her conflict, her hesitation.

"Maybe I was too sure," he said, wistfully. "Maybe I counted on you too much, Marcia. But oh, I want you so. What is there in the world for me but you? Won't you let me—won't you let me even try to be decent again? Can't you trust me just a little bit, even if I don't deserve it? It isn't like you to be hard, Marcia. I—I— Well—I sort of relied on you being—just the same—all the time. If you've changed—then there's nothing steady in the world."

She could not deny him. What was there in the,

world for him without her, he had asked. And what was there in the world for her—without him?

She leaned toward him and stretched out her hands to him, tenderly, loyally: "I haven't changed," she said. "I haven't changed. I'm your wife—always."

THE END.

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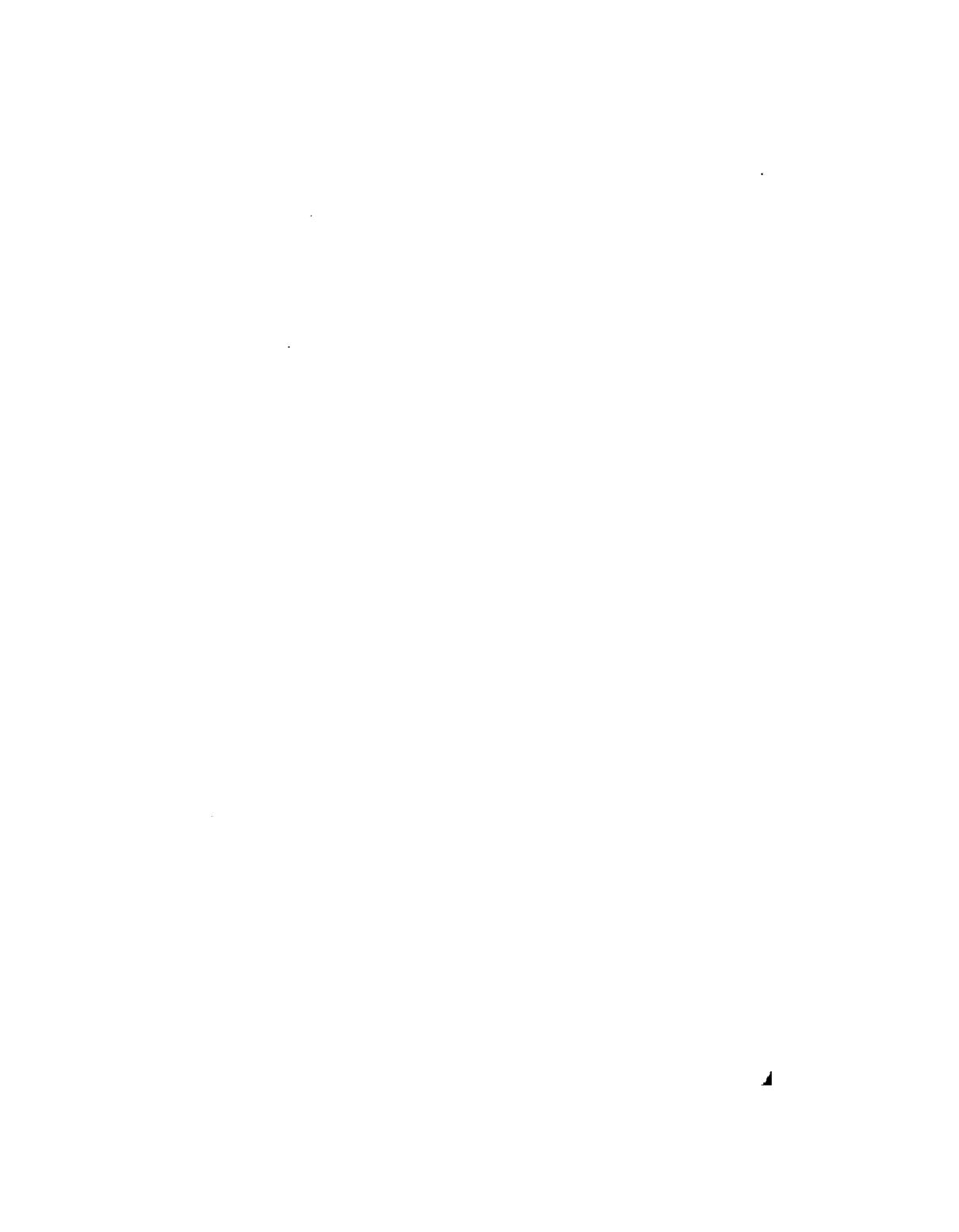
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